

THE LITTLE ACROBAT



JANIE PRICHARD DUGGAN



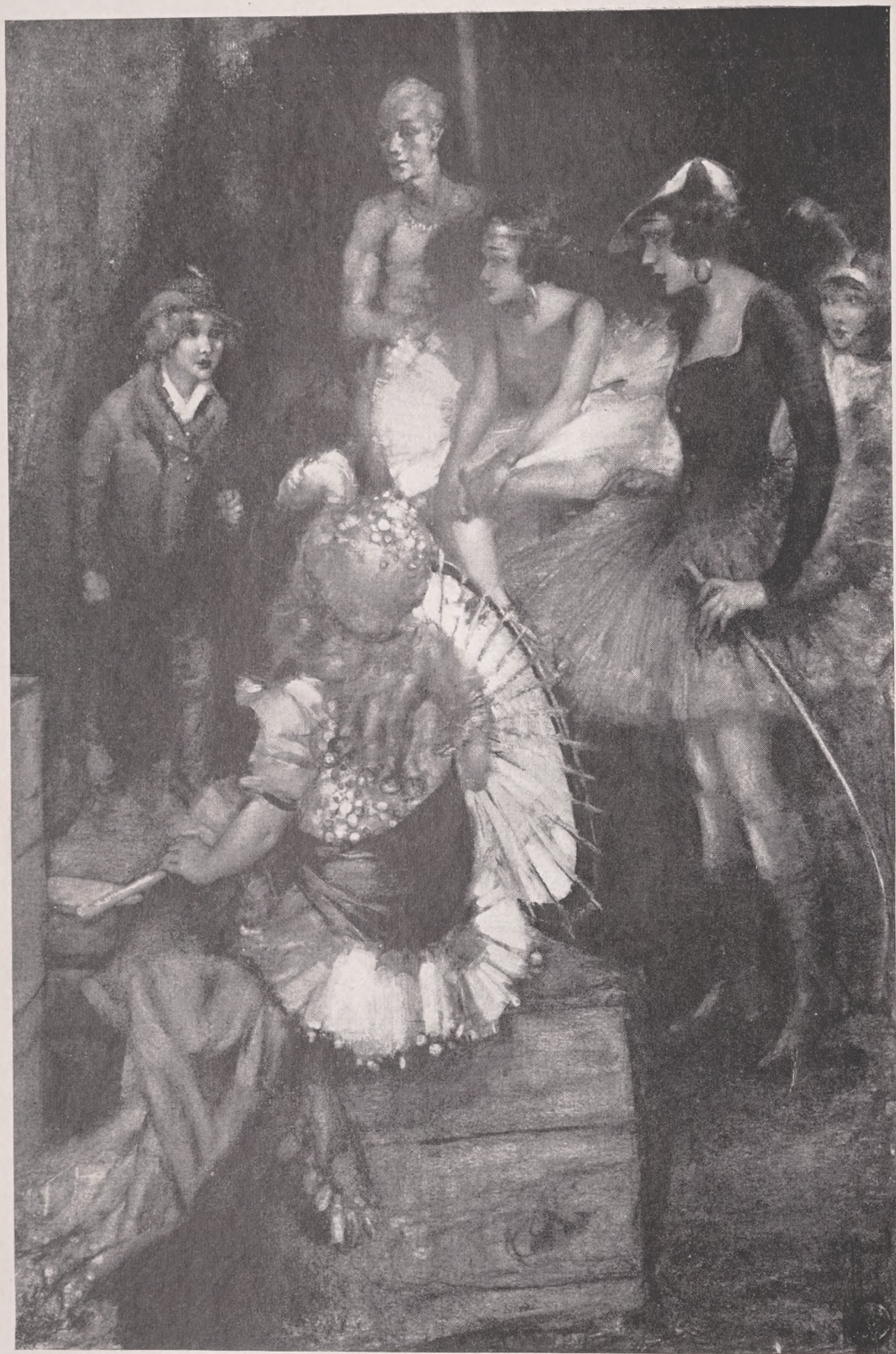
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THE LITTLE ACROBAT



The pale apparition of Natale startled them all. *Frontispiece.*
See page 167.

THE LITTLE ACROBAT

A STORY OF ITALY

BY

JANIE PRICHARD DUGGAN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

NANA FRENCH BICKFORD



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DEDICATED
TO MEMORIES OF
TWO LITTLE "ANGELICALS" OF ROME
SPOTTISWOODE AND SUSIE
BY
"CUDDIE"

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THE LITTLE ACROBAT

A STORY OF ITALY

CHAPTER I

ALONG THE WHITE ROAD

THE July sunshine lay hot and golden over the fields of wheat on the Italian hillsides, and the deep shade of the chestnut woods along the road was more inviting than the white glare beyond. The sun stood directly overhead, and along the middle of that white, dusty road there was not an inch of shadow.

A small brown house on wheels crept slowly along this sunny way, drawn by a queer, ill-matched team of three — a plump white horse with long, silky mane and tail, a large spotted horse with fierce eyes and

nostrils, and a lean, little brown pony, with strangely twisted neck.

Up and up, always a little higher up, the horses toiled with the house-wagon, as the road rose into the mountains. From the interior of the wagon came the sound of voices, mingled now and then with a complaining note, or an exclamation of pain. The travelers were very tired, and poor Pietro's fever was rising with every turn of the wheels.

Several men and a sturdy girl of fifteen walked beside the horses in the powdery white dust. Behind the big wagon lagged a boy of eight or nine years. This was Natale,¹ a slight little fellow, with dusty lean legs and dragging feet. His light brown hair curled damply about his sun-browned forehead, and he wore an old, misshapen hat set far back on his pretty head. His loosely fitting clothes were dingy with dust but

¹ Pronounced Nah-tah'le.

Natale did not mind, for, presently, they would come to Cutigliano, the old, old town on the mountain side, and there they would camp out on the soft, green grass. And Natale knew from much experience that nothing could clean the dust from travel-stained clothes so well as rolling down the grassy slopes of the chestnut woods, with Niero and Bianco as companions.

Of course the sun was hot; was it not always hot at noon of a summer's day in the Apennines? But Niero did not complain, and why should Natale?

Bianco had tired of trotting along at Natale's side, and at the last stopping-place, when Pietro had had a drink of water from the wayside fountain, the tired little black dog had begged to be allowed to ride, and had been willingly taken inside the wagon.

Natale never asked to ride in the wagon, unless he were very tired and sleepy. They

were rather crowded in there even without him, for Pietro took up a great deal of room, now that he had to lie down all the time. Besides, the other children, good travelers as they usually were, sometimes grew quarrelsome and made the mothers and the grandmother angry. Natale did not like quarreling and loud voices, so he always preferred his resting times to be given him on the back of one of the horses. But now Tesore and Il Duca were tired also, and they were so near Cutigliano, it did not matter if Natale did lag behind a little, always with big Niero for company.

Niero was a large, lean, white dog with a closely sheared body. About his neck, however, he wore a fluffy collar of long white hair, and bracelets of the same adorned his four paws, while his long tail ended in a tuft, having very much the appearance of a dishmop. Why this white dog should have been named Niero, mean-

ing black, the clown who had also named the little black dog Bianco, white, could have best explained.

By and by, long after the gray church tower had come in sight and the red-tiled roofs of the town showed bunched together against the green of the wooded hillside, the travelers reached the arched stone bridge across the river at the foot of the mountain. Here the wagon made a halt before beginning the last steep climb to the town. Above, they could see the stone wall which was the boundary of the road winding by loops, one above the other, up the mountain side, but the town had now disappeared from view, so sheer was the rise of the chestnut woods.

This halt gave Natale time to come up with the wagon, and then he sat down with a tired sigh on a heap of mending-stones by the roadside, in front of the wagon door. His legs ached with weariness, but this was

no time to think of riding, as even the women and all the children but Pietro must alight now, to relieve the horses in the last pull up hill. Natale watched them descend from the wagon one by one, by the steps one of the musicians placed at the door.

First came Nonna, the grandmother of Rudolfo and Tito and the five other children of the blond acrobat, Antonio Bisbini. She was not Natale's Nonna, of course, yet everybody called her Nonna, and why should not he, who had no grandmother of his own?

Nonna carried Tito in her arms and led Rudolfo by the hand. Then came Tito's mother, the three-months'-old infant, Gigi, in her arms, followed by Olga, who held little Maria by the hand. Next, Natale's own mamá stepped down, glad to stretch her active limbs by walking, after nursing Pietro for so many tedious hours. Then the rest of Bisbini's children scrambled

out, aided by the music-man's helping hands.

On they went again then, the clown, who was Natale's stepfather, walking at the horses' heads, and cracking his long whip, and chirruping to them while the other men strode behind the wagon, pushing upon it with all their might at the steep places in the road.

The women and children, meanwhile, left the road to climb the short cuts upward, leading directly from terrace to terrace, — mere paths paved with rough stones, here and there loosened and displaced by rushing rain-torrents of the past. The little ones bore the heat and the roughness of the way without murmuring, being allowed to straggle along as they pleased, now stopping to gather a red poppy from the edge of the wheat, now dropping on the ground to search for a briar afflicting some tired foot. Natale was not the last in the pro-

cession now, for he was anxious to get to the top and see what the tall wheat and the green slopes were hiding from his eyes.

At last they reached the wide turn in the road where the wagon must finally stop, at the edge of the town field. The wagon also came toiling upward, and now the good horses might rest. So these were unhitched from the wagon, and while one or two of the men led them up the steep, paved street into the village to find food and shelter for them, the others attended to the house-wagon, drawn close against the low stone wall inclosing the field, placing great stones against the wheels to steady it in its place. Now was Natale's hour and the dogs', and they understood this as well as he! Over the low wall they scampered and down on the soft, hot grass they lay, rolling over and over down the gentle slope of the field until, suddenly, Natale found himself landing

directly upon his feet, with a whirring in his head, and the sound of distressed barking in his ears.

The dogs had had the wit to stop on the very edge of a sharp descent which Natale had not noticed, and now they stood on the bank, half-a-dozen feet above him, their forefeet firmly planted on the brink of the grassy precipice, and their tufty tails high in the air, begging with all their might to know whether their dear little comrade were hurt. Natale was not hurt, but the jar of the descent gave him a queer feeling under the waistband of his trousers, and he sat down directly where he stood, on the lower terrace, turning his back upon the dogs.

A fringe of bushes threw a narrow band of shade about him from above, and he made up his mind to stay there till something should be made ready for dinner. He hoped he would not be wanted to fetch

anything from the village, — he was always fetching something for somebody. He had heard his mother calling to her husband to bring a little meal for the polenta,¹ when he should finish stabling the horses, and he knew there was wine left in the flask in the wagon.

From where Natale sat he could look directly down upon the roof of a house far down by the stone bridge and could faintly hear the rushing of the little river Lima over the rocks. Presently he eased himself out on the grass at full length, with his arms crossed beneath his head. As he dropped off to sleep, he was thinking how well it was that there could be no performance in the tent that evening. He was sure that Arduina would laugh more than ever at his stiff little feats on the circus carpet if he should have to turn somersaults after the long tramp.

¹ Mush of corn meal.

Then Natale slept, with the great green mountains closing around him, and Bianco the black dog and Niero the white keeping watch above his head from where they had stretched themselves on the edge of the terrace in the sun.

CHAPTER II

NONNA

NATALE, as will have been discovered by this time, was an Italian circus boy, a cheerful, happy little soul, who loved his "profession", and whose ambition reached to the giddy height of some day rivaling even Antonio Bisbini in his wonderful trapeze performances. He loved everything connected with the life he led, — the long slow journeyings through his beautiful Italy, the camping out at night along the quiet roads, the open-air loungings in some village through the sunny days, until the evening should come and the oil lamps be lighted in the tent, and the people come crowding

in to see Arduina dance the tight rope, and little Olga do her wonderful turns and twists on the carpet, and to applaud Antonio and the clown and the horses, and — yes, and himself too, little Natale, stiff as his short thin legs always were and hopeless, as Arduina declared, in his bows and scrapes.

Besides the three musicians, there were two families in the strolling company. Giovanni Marzuchetti was the clown, also the stepfather of Paulo, Arduina, Pietro, Natale and little Maria, and husband of Elvira, the black-haired mother of the five children. This man had no children of his own but was kind in his rough, clownish way to Natale and the rest.

It is not difficult to understand why Giovanni should have married Elvira and her family, when it was known that the woman brought to her husband a small fortune in the shape of her own wonderful skill as a rider of horses, and the little ones

as possible acrobats of the future. They had been married for two years now, and if Giovanni had counted largely upon his ready-made family for speedy reënforcements in the "ring", he must have become a little discouraged even by this time. It is true that Paulo and Arduina were well trained in the art of circus acting; but poor Pietro, the middle-sized one, who was twelve years old, was always ailing and feeble. Sleeping out of doors in the marshy regions had developed in his system a chronic fever which could not be thrown off, even with the aid of Nonna's assiduous doctoring, and lately the weakness had settled in one leg and foot, threatening permanent lameness.

Natale, who came next, was agile enough when running about on his slim brown legs, but his funny stiff-legged somersaults and awkward antics in the ring were matters of jesting among the whole troop. Poor little

Natale, who did so wish to be like Antonio Bisbini!

Lastly there was Maria, who was a mere baby and as yet only just learning to stand upright on her stepfather's head.

But Antonio Bisbini, the father of the other family, was the star of the little troop of strolling players. Tall and lean and muscular, he stood six feet two in his sandals. His blond hair and skin and strong, clear-cut features gave him the look of some stern young Viking from the cold forests of the North, yet this youthful-looking, ruddy athlete was already the father of seven young children.

No one in the company, not even the clown, could hold a candle to Antonio in looks or in graceful skill. Natale was sure that the noblest and most beautiful figure in all Italy was that of Antonio Bisbini as he would step forth from behind the tent-curtain, ready to thrill the spectators about

the ring. The flesh-colored tights clothing his limbs showed to perfection their symmetry and grace, relieved by the brilliantly spangled hip garment of black velvet and fringe, while the proud glance of his gray eyes and the light tread of his feet never failed to impress the beholder.

Antonio's oldest, little red-haired Olga, tumbled and danced with all a healthy child's love of activity and applause, and Oh! how Natale envied her the perfect "wheels" she turned, one after the other with dizzying swiftness across the dusty strip of carpet in the ring. But the rest of Antonio's seven were as yet too small to be useful as tumblers or dancers, and Nonna's hands were always full, while their mother did her daring dances in the air.

The three musicians, then, and Nonna completed this strolling band of twenty, with the two horses, the dogs and the twisted-necked pony. Poor Caffero had

grievously hurt his pretty neck one day when very young, while tied in his stall and leaping to reach his food from a manger set cruelly high. Since then he had trotted painfully through three years of going up and down the earth, with his brown head and long neck twisted far around to one side without the power of righting them. Caffero would have made a pretty part of the show had not this accident befallen him. As it was, he was good for little but helping to guide the house-wagon along the weary roads. Yet every one loved Caffero.

On the day of the arrival at Cutigliano the two horses Tesoro and Il Duca were left in their stalls in the village stables during the whole afternoon, while Caffero was brought down the steep village street and allowed to graze in the public field. Nonna herself had gone up for him with Tito in her arms, after the midday meal of polenta, or thick mush of yellow meal, had been eaten.

As the trio passed through the narrow street of the village, many heads turned to wonder at the strangers — the gray-haired woman, the bright-eyed child in her arms, and poor Caffero, who always seemed pulling against the leading rope and trying to twist his head after something left behind.

It was while Nonna, a little later, was tying Caffero's rope to a tree in the field that she spied the two dogs asleep in the sun near the edge of the terrace. As Tito recognized them at the same time, and called them in his baby voice, the grandmother added her summons, and was rather astonished at their failure to obey. They bounded to their feet, it is true, but instead of scampering to meet her, they stood still, quivering with nervous excitement and waving their tails in much perplexity. Then as Tito began to fret and belabor the air with his fists, Nonna started swiftly toward the

dogs with something threatening in her gait.

But where were they, those lazy brutes, which a moment before had defied her and then had promptly disappeared? A few more hasty steps brought Nonna near enough to the edge of the descent to see both Niero and Bianco crouching over Natale on the lower terrace. The boy had been awakened by the sudden onset of his faithful friends, and lay looking lazily upward as Nonna and Tito peered over at him.

“Natalino!” the old woman exclaimed, and, at the word, Natale scrambled to his feet.

“I am ready! Where am I to go?” he asked hurriedly, preparing to creep up the bank. But Nonna only laughed and reached down a helping hand to the child, as he clutched at the long grass for support.

"Come and eat your polenta," she said, when Natale stood at her side, the dogs panting close by. "I suppose they have saved you a bite. Why did you run away? Though, as for that, you were not missed in all this hurly-burly of arriving. Now, Niero, stand on your hind legs and beg. See, Tito is fretting for you to do it —"

"But we haven't a bone or a crust of bread for him, Nonna," Natale pleaded. "See how sadly his eyes look at you. Giovanni always gives him a bone."

"There! take to your legs then, poor thing!" Nonna cried in a friendly way to the hungry dog. "Perhaps to-morrow there will be a bone. Who knows?"

Natale ran off toward the wagon, followed by the patient animals, who perhaps were well assured that he was going to share with them his own scanty heap of polenta.

The brown house on wheels leaned slightly inward against the stone wall for

security, as the hill's incline was steep at this point. The door opened directly upon the top of the wall, which formed a broad and convenient doorstep, reached from the ground by a short ladder. About the wagon and in the field close by everybody was busy.

The great canvas of the tent had been unpacked from the top of the wagon, and the two women sat on the ground patching the holes and thin places worn in it by long use. Some of the men were making trips back and forth from wagon and field, carrying sections of board for inclosing the ring. These were to be set up in their places by and by, when Antonio should have finished marking off the circle on the grass, with the hole in the center for the tent pole. There was nothing, as yet, for the children to do but loll in the shadow of the wagon, asleep or awake, and chatter among themselves.

As Natale and the dogs drew near, Elvira, the boy's mother, looked up from her stitching and clapped her hand to her forehead on seeing them.

"Natale! I had forgotten the child. Little pest, where have you been, away from us all, and your dinner? One would think you had friends in the town and had been taking your polenta in grander houses than ours here."

Natale replied to these mocking words with only a rather naughty shrug of the shoulders, and went to sit down on the lowest step of the short ladder against the wall.

"Give him his polenta, Arduina," Nonna called shrilly from a little way behind. "He was asleep, Elvira, all tired out with walking to-day as much as any man among us. I keep my eyes open. Don't scold the boy."

"One would think my Natale your own

grandson, Nonna," Elvira replied, laughing good-naturedly.

"All boys are as her own sons or grandsons," Nonna's daughter-in-law interposed carelessly, as the old woman passed on with Tito, perhaps to see that Arduina gave Natale his proper share of mush.

In Nonna's big warm heart there was indeed room for the sons and grandsons of those who were too sparing of motherly love and care for their own. The gray-haired woman had long ago accepted this wandering life for the sake of continuing near to her only son, Antonio, the acrobat, and Antonio's children. When her boy at the age of twenty-two had given up everything that his mother thought of worth in the world — home, a decent, quiet life in it, books, school, a career as a priest — in order to marry Cara, a rosy, lithe-limbed rope-dancer out of Egypt, he had found that his mother was not going to be given up

along with these. By and by, when the babies began to come every year or two, Nonna came to be appreciated even by the fantastic daughter-in-law given her by Antonio, while in the hearts of all the little ones Nonna was — well, Nonna, — and therefore everything good and patient and sweet.

It was Nonna who cared for the ailing Pietro, who rubbed Natale's stiff ankles and elbows with an ointment of her own invention to limber them up, who thought to tuck Olga's long red hair out of the way when practice time came and the curling locks would have teased the little face and shoulders turned upside down and hindside before. It was Nonna who nursed the babies and put them to bed while the mothers rode the horses in the tent, and Nonna who led the poor pony about to "fresh fields and pastures new", and Nonna who instructed giddy-brained Arduina in the simple myste-

ries of concocting savory stews out of next to nothing, and how to make corn meal for ten do service as polenta for twice as many. The little troop could not have done without Nonna, no, indeed !

CHAPTER III

IN THE RING

IT took all of that first day and most of the next to get everything into shape for an exhibition on the second night after the arrival of the circus troop at Cutigliano.

The turf had been removed from the ring, or round space inclosed by the low panels of wood, and the tent pole erected, by the time the canvas was mended and the side curtains were ready to be hung.

The sun was just about to slip over the mountain rim in the west when everything was done, and it only remained to draw the stout ropes and hoist the canvas into position. Natale was generally on hand when this was done, listening for the creaking of the pulley at the top of the pole, as

the dull yellow canvas slowly rose into position, till, all at once, it spread like a queer, pointed mushroom over the green grass of the field.

It was a fortunate thing that there was no wind that first evening, for if there had been even a stiff breeze there would have been no performance. A very little wind caught under the canvas spread on that exposed hillside before it was securely roped into place might have carried it all away to be stranded in the tops of the chestnut trees below, and a new canvas for such a *circo* as that would have cost certainly three hundred francs.

When at last the tent was raised, Giovanni hung above the entrance a broad strip of blue canvas with clowns' and horses' heads painted upon it, and the sign in large letters: "Circo Equestre", which is Italian for "Circus with Horses."

Lastly, figured curtains of pale green

calico were hung around the little vestibule, so that outsiders who had not paid the entrance fee might not peep inside and see what was going on, without payment.

Now all was ready, and it was still early, although almost dark in the field. Among the mountains, where one lives perhaps at the foot or even half-way up the slopes, night falls early, because the sinking sun is hidden from sight over the mountain tops long before it really drops into the sea behind them.

Yet it was not quite time to light the lamps inside the tent, as the performance was not to begin until half-past eight o'clock. Cutigliano was full of Italians, and a few English and Americans who had left the hot cities behind, with their churches and picture galleries and ruins, and had come to the pleasant hotels of the ancient mountain town to enjoy the fine air and the beautiful chestnut woods during the hot

summer months. These visitors would not be through with their dinners at the hotels before eight o'clock, while the servants and plain village folk would find a late hour convenient for coming down the hill to the yellow tent.

At seven o'clock, however, the three men, with the big brass horn, the cornet and the drum, climbed the stony street into the town and made lively music in the little stone-paved *piazzas*, or open squares, where the children played in the sunset light.

By this time everybody in Cutigliano had learned what had been going on down in the field for the past two days, and many even of the rich strangers had made up their minds to go to see the show, partly out of curiosity, partly out of kindly purpose to help the strolling players. It had been announced that six *soldi*, or cents, would admit to the side of the ring where there would be benches and a chair or two for

seats, while three cents offered room on the other side with a few boards and the green grass as accommodation. Visitors were invited to bring chairs for their sittings, if possible.

The music sounded very brave and loud as it returned down the very steepest street of all, which ran between high walls past Madame Cioche's English *pension* or boarding-house and ended in the field. As this was a dark and even dangerous descent at night for the unwary, Antonio had driven a nail into a tree at the foot of the street, and had hung there a smutty tin lamp, with the light flaring and the smoke pouring from two long spouts.

Nonna had beguiled most of the children away from the tent by this time, and was putting the youngest to bed in the wagon, while the others rolled over the grass behind the tent.

Natale was as busy as a bee in the small

tent which opened out of the large one. This was the dressing room, and the different costumes of the actors lay in heaps on the boxes scattered about.

As half-past eight o'clock approached, the boy became as excited as if this were to be his first appearance in public, and he kept lifting up the flap of curtain dividing the two tents to see how fast the seats were filling. The band had brought back a horde of village children in its train, and though few of these were possessed of the three cents charged for children, they served to keep up an appearance of bustle and enterprise outside, where the band now played the National Hymn of Italy gaily in the light of the big lamp at the entrance.

Cara, the mother of Olga and the rest of the seven, stood in the vestibule and took in the great copper cents which by and by began to pile up in the bowl on the table. She was a very striking person to look at,

with her coal-black hair frizzed bushily on each side of her head, with her flashing black eyes and her heavy brows, her red, red lips and cheeks, and her scarlet and black gown. No one dared to slip in behind the rustling skirts or portly form of anybody without paying, for her piercing eyes seemed everywhere. Once or twice, when the crowds about the doors seemed to hesitate and to wonder whether, after all, it were worth while to expend six or even three cents for what was to be seen behind the curtain, the pretty little figure of her Olga was seen to flit, as if by accident, across the vestibule, the full light streaming over her little full blouse of yellow satin, and her pink feet tripping as if on air.

The anxious half-hour of expectation ended in the sight of a full circle surrounding the ring, and then the band came inside and all the performers slipped into the smaller tent and hurried on their costumes.

The band played on; Arduina danced a measured dance on the tight rope which was stretched near the ground; the clown made his funny jokes; Antonio performed his clever feats on the bars; Elvira rode the galloping horses with Cara dancing in and out and everywhere, while Giovanni cracked the whip and Paulo held the bar for Il Duca to leap. The pantomime then brought shouts of laughter and loud hand-clappings from the spectators; and afterward the tumbling began.

There was nothing that Olga loved so much, and she showed it in every line of her chubby, yet nimble little figure as she came prancing into the ring, and then went heels over head, over and over again, without stopping to breathe, as far as the strip of dusty carpet stretched. Then back again she tumbled, only stopping to toss a stray wisp of hair from her flushed face.

Next Arduina came tripping in, and over

and over she went too, not so gracefully and daintily as Olga had done, for Arduina was getting a little too large for that kind of thing, — a great girl of fifteen years.

The clown followed Arduina, dressed in his clumsy suit of black and white, and what a farce his tumbling was, to be sure; only the spectators must have known that he failed in order to make them laugh at his awkwardness, and make merry they did.

Somehow Natale never quite enjoyed the laughter which often accompanied his own performances, and now his time had come.

“*Ecco! Natalino!*” called his stepfather, the clown, rushing behind the curtain all breathless and covered with dust. “Over and over and over you go, youngster, without stopping to sneeze between!”

Natale was such a little fellow, so much smaller than Olga even, that many of the faces outside the ring softened at sight of him, as he darted out into the light of the

lamps and then halted to make his funny little salute. He was dressed in imitation of the clown, in long black trousers and a tailed black coat, with a pointed white waistcoat reaching below his waist. With an earnest seriousness very different from Olga's smiling grace, Natale turned his first somersault, paused on his back, turned another jerkily, while the little boys watching him hooted, and a ripple of laughter ran around the ring. Back again he came, however, his thin black legs sprawling in air, and his pale little face flushing with the exertion. On his feet again, he clapped one hand to the back of his neck, bobbed his head to the spectators, and trotted off behind the friendly curtain, satisfied that he had, at least, done as well as usual, and pleased with the loud clapping attending his exit. Indeed, there was a clapping and a calling out of something with laughing voices.

*"Il picino! Il picino!"*¹

"You will have to go back, Natalino," laughed the clown. "Salute them and stand on your head, boy, but don't lose it on the way."

The music played loudly, and Natale stepped gravely back again, made his odd little bow, and fell over on his hands as the first step toward standing on his head. Poor, stiff little legs! It took more than one effort to throw them into an upright position above his head, but finally he really did accomplish it, and stood thus several seconds while the shouting and laughing went on.

When Natale had disappeared a second time behind the curtain, there were a few grave faces among the laughing ones looking on. An English lady whispered to her companion and sighed.

"The poor little fellow is evidently afraid

¹ "The little boy! The little boy!"

to disobey that dreadful clown," she said. "Did you see how he trembled as the man stood over him, when he tried to stand on his head? Something ought to be done to put a stop to this, Betty."

"The child looks weak, as if he were not very well fed," Betty answered, "but I do not think he looks unhappy. And the clown was certainly smiling, and seemed to be standing by as if to help the little boy accomplish his wonderful feat, I thought. Don't distress yourself, Aunty. He is just learning, it may be, and they bring him in to contrast him with that little beauty who turned the 'wheels.' Send the boy some good bread and meat to-morrow, and that will be better for him than our empty sympathy."

But "Aunty" was not satisfied, as we shall see.

The last act of the evening again brought Natale to the fore. The big spotted horse,

Il Duca, was again brought into the ring, and after he had cantered gaily around inside the ring many times, to the music of a schottisch, striking terror to the ladies occupying the front seats, with their knees pressed against the low barrier, the clown suddenly called a halt and caught the bridle of the panting steed. Gently the solemn strains of the "Dead March" sounded through the tent, and Il Duca fell slowly and painfully upon his knees, and then rolled over upon the ground, apparently dying. The light dust of the ring stirred under the beast's laboring nostrils, and deep groans issued from his throat, while Giovanni stood mournfully by and the music played on.

CHAPTER IV

THE FESTIVAL OF SAN LORENZO

SUDDENLY the small black figure of Natale appeared, kneeling at the horse's side, although no one had seen him slip in. With his hands clasped in distress, he lifted his voice in such a disconsolate wail that even Betty started and wondered if the horse could be really dying.

The solemn march was still sounding in the tent, and before speaking the clown gave the spectators full time to take in the tragic tableau. Then he exclaimed briskly :

“What are you crying about, boy?”

“Because our horse is dead.”

“Do you think he is quite dead, Natale?”

“Oh, quite,” wailed the child.

“Get up and feel his pulse, boy. If there is any pulse he is not dead.”

Natale went nearer and took one of the great hoofs of the horse fearlessly into his little hands, and felt for the “pulse.”

“Well, what do you find?” asked the clown impatiently.

“There isn’t any pulse,” the little fellow wailed again, laying down the big black hoof with the utmost tenderness.

“Too bad,” quoth the clown, taking his seat deliberately on the prostrate horse, which lay as motionless as if certainly dead. Then, all in a moment, Natale’s manner changed, and he skipped around in front of Giovanni, remarking glibly that the gentleman had found a beautiful sofa to sit upon.

“And I shall have a kiss to prove that the beast is not dead,” exclaimed the clown, chirruping a little and smacking his lips. And the great brown head of the horse lifted itself from the dust, the graceful neck

turned, and Il Duca actually kissed his master, then scrambled hastily to his feet as if glad for that job to be over, while Giovanni hurried him out of the ring.

“Such silly jokes!” commented Mrs. Bishop, otherwise Aunty, as the performance ended, and the rollicking crowd poured out of the tent. “Think of my having spent two whole hours listening to them, and all on pins too, for fear that poor, ill-used child should be forced to do some other unchristian thing.”

“But, Aunty, what did you expect when you came?” Betty asked impatiently. “Surely the little show was not bad, and there was actually nothing but what was quite decent in every way.”

“I call it ‘bad’ to beat and starve children into turning themselves into monkeys.”

“If people would not go to see the ‘monkeys’ it would be stopped,” was Betty’s retort.

“Well, I am sure I only went to oblige Mrs. Choky,” Aunty said in an injured tone. “She said she thought we ought to encourage the poor people on their first night. But it will be my last night there, as I shall very soon inform her. ‘Encourage’ them to martyrize that poor child, indeed!”

From the first performance in Cutigliano, therefore, Natale’s trouble began, although he did not know it. Contented and tired he lay down in his corner of the brown house on wheels and went to sleep, while the men let down the big yellow canvas of the large tent and furled it about the pole. But first, he ate his supper of macaroni with the rest of the actors, gathered in the small tent behind. Midnight suppers were the rule on the nights when there were performances, as it would have been at the risk of upsetting their stomachs in more ways than one to eat food beforehand.

Later, the stars kept quiet watch above

the little encampment, where even Pietro slept well, with the open house door admitting the fresh air of the mountains.

For ten days the yellow "mushroom" spread over the grass of the field, although very much in the way of the fine city gentlemen, playing at ball with bats like tambourines. The noisy music at night and the cheering in the tent may have kept the invalids in the nearest boarding-houses awake and nervous, and the people at large may have grown tired of the performances which they soon learned by heart, but no one felt inclined to hustle the poor people away, and no one grumbled except Mrs. Bishop.

There was something pathetic about the clown in his everyday dress, his gayety and paint all gone and the deep lines of his face showing too plainly in the garish light of day, as he pottered about the tent, adjusting ropes, and keeping off the village boys

who would throw stones upon the old canvas, or play hide and seek among the curtains. It gave one a queer feeling, also, to fancy the drooping figure of Pietro, with his pure little face like alabaster, a member of the "wicked circus troop."

This child was perhaps twelve years old, and he had the face of an angel. He had begun to lose his daily feverishness after a week in the mountains, and was soon able to limp, and later to run feebly about the field with the village boys.

But Natale, spidery little Natale, interested every one more even than did Pietro. Yet he looked only an everyday lad during the long summer days, when he trotted up and down, to and from the town, carrying now a bowl of this, now a flask of that, but always carrying something. To most people he seemed as happy as the days were long, just as ready for a chat with a strange foreigner who might address him in broken



Mrs. Bishop looked down upon the tent from the garden terrace.
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Italian as with old Sora Teresa who sold fruit and vegetables in the piazza, and who sometimes presented him with a ripe red tomato, or a slice of melon all green and pink.

But Mrs. Bishop looked down upon the tent from the garden terrace of Madame Cioche's boarding-house every day, and slowly formed a plan for making Natale's life happier. Poor little Natale!

The terrace garden above the field was shaded with plane trees and the mountain ash, and the grass was soft and richly green. Each afternoon some of the boarders would gather at the palings on the edge of this garden and watch the gentlemen playing ball below, and the village boys imitating Olga and Natale at turning somersaults and wheels.

One afternoon, while the boarders were drinking tea under the ash trees, with the berries overhead turning red, and the sun

streaming across the croquet ground, there came a knock at the side door of the boarding-house. Madame Cioche herself opened the door, and there stood Natale, smiling up into her face, with the old blue hat set far back on his dark curls. The lady noticed that the boy's face was very clean.

"Happy day to you," he said brightly, using the peasant form of address, "and my mamá says will you please send her a cup of tea? She is feeling ill to-day."

Of course Madame Cioche would send the tea, fetching it herself from the dining room and handing it to the boy. But she kept Natale a moment to ask how it was that his mamá could possibly like tea.

"Oh, but she has it every day when we are in Egypt," was the reply. "And to-day her head aches. Thank you, Signora." And Natale went off down the hill carrying the big cup as carefully as his bowls and flasks were always carried.

Mrs. Bishop overheard the word "Egypt" and sighed.

The next day was Sunday and an important festival, being the day of San Lorenzo. A great harvest of *soldi* was expected, as peasants from all the mountain villages would come trooping in that day, to go to high mass in the church under the old mountain firs, and to take part in the procession of the "saints" in the afternoon. So there was, of course, to be a performance in the tent that day, but in the afternoon this time, just after the procession, instead of in the evening, when everybody would be tired or toiling homeward along the dark mountain ways. As there was nothing for him to do about the tent, however, until five o'clock should boom from the stone tower of the church, Natale made good use of his legs during the whole day, for there was much to see.

Betty Bishop had tossed a penny into his

hands down over the garden palings that very Sunday morning. Perhaps she was thinking of some little child at home in England who would be clamoring for a penny to carry to Sunday school, but Natale had no thought of dropping his precious two *soldi* into the priest's collecting bag in the church.

The *piazza* was too fascinating a place to be passed by, when one held a penny of his own fast in his fist. With the dogs on each side of him, therefore, Natale spent most of the day above in the town, going from booth to booth, and in fancy spending his money over and over again. There were sweets of various kinds offered for sale on the little tables along the steep, narrow streets, and booths of everything from coarse stuffs and ready-made clothing to breastpins of gay mosaic work and filigree rings.

Everywhere Natale was jostled by the

peasants who all through the morning had flocked to the town, dressed in their best clothes and wearing holiday looks on their faces. The women and girls wore gay kerchiefs on their heads, with brilliant borderings and flowing ends, while even the men wore bits of vivid color in the shape of gorgeous neck scarfs spread over their white shirt fronts. Mingled with these walked the lords and ladies of a higher class dressed according to the fashion plates of Paris, and seeming to enjoy the hot sunshine and the gay restiveness of the multitude as much as the plainer folk. All day the frolic and prayers and the music of the town band and the church organ went on in the little town, till mid-afternoon, when there fell a hush over all and a great expectation.

Natale had not a very good place from which to see the procession pass, for he stood between a very stout peasant woman and a visiting priest in his full black gown.

Still, he managed to peer from under their elbows without attracting their attention, and he was content, holding securely in one hand, meanwhile, the balloon whistle which he had finally purchased with his penny. The pretty red bubble of rubber had not yet burst, and Natale was happy in its possession. The handful of crisp wafers flavored with anise seed, which he had almost bought — so very foolish he had been — would have been eaten long ere this, and it would be as if he had never had a penny of his own tossed over the fence to him by a smiling young lady, but now he still had the whistle !

On they came, the straggling company of men and boys, dressed in white gowns and cowls, and bearing huge lighted candles in their hands. Natale thought he would like to have been one of the two boys bearing the immense candlesticks of brass ; yet, after all, the candlesticks must be very

heavy, and they were propped very uncomfortably on the little boys' stomachs, and very red and perspiring were the little boys' faces.

Natale thought the men's feet ugly and clumsy, showing below the white gowns, and their harsh, chanting voices made him shiver. But he could not follow the awkward marching steps of the peasants with laughing looks as some of the onlookers were doing, for here, behind the banners and crucifixes, came two very curious-looking objects.

"*Ecco!* the dead saints!" he exclaimed softly to himself. "How heavy they must be in the glass boxes on the men's shoulders. Yet our Antonio Bisbini would never bend so under a small box as those men do. Ah! but the little girls are pretty, so pretty in their white veils, and scattering flowers before the saints."

The crowd closed in upon the end of the

procession now, and Natale could see no more, as he was nearly overturned where he stood. After a breathless moment or two, he found himself left in peace and quiet under the great old fir trees in front of the church, with the crowd all gone and Niero and Bianco with them.

Nonna had told him to be sure and see the saints, if possible, so he went into the dark old church and sat down on a low chair to wait for the procession to return. He knew that San Lorenzo and Sant' Aurelio would surely be brought back to spend the night in the church, perhaps in front of the candle-lighted altar, and he wished to please Nonna. It was dark and quiet in his corner under the organ gallery, and it was a very easy and natural thing for a tired little boy to fall asleep in that quiet place.

When the procession returned after half an hour, it was without the blare of trumpets and the crash of organ music, though for a

long while shuffling feet passed in and out. This continued until everybody had looked at the two saints robed in costly garments and reposing now at full length on their satin cushions within their caskets of glass set before the altar. Many touched the rich cloths draping the caskets with reverent fingers, and pressed kisses on the cold glass before passing out into the radiant sunset light.

When Natale waked, the church doors were still open, but only one light swung before the high altar, and there was no trace anywhere of dead saint or living soul. He groped his way among the disarranged chairs and benches quite to the altar rail, but even the empty biers had been borne away to some inner recess of the church, so, with a dread that he had overslept awaking in his mind, Natale found his way out of the church again.

The purple bloom of evening was creeping

up the mountain sides, and a star glowed in the sky. Just above the mountain line in the west the crescent moon hovered, as if uncertain over which side to sink. The dread in Natale's mind had nothing to do with saints or dark churches. On awaking, his first sensation had been a fear that he might have missed the afternoon performance in the beloved tent, and now, standing outside the church in the dusk, he knew that he had missed it!

With a sob in his throat he turned his face from the telltale sky, and fled through the village down to the field. When he reached the wagon, — for he would not go to the tent, quiet now and unlighted, — the first words he heard came from Olga:

“Have you not heard, Natalino? Giovanni has lost a hundred francs! Somebody stole them when he changed his coat in the little tent. Yes, I know you were not there! We wondered where you could be!”

CHAPTER V

A GIFT FOR THE CIRCUS

NATALE held his breath with horror. One hundred francs lost! And he not at hand to hear of it, to help look for the money, among the very first? He could not ask Olga how it had happened, because his heart was almost too disappointed and sore for words. He sat down on the wall, with his back toward the tent, and waited for her to tell all about the loss, although he was not at all certain that she would condescend to do so. In fact, she said not a word more, but stood in front of Natale, wondering not a little at his unusual quiet.

“You are sulky!” she exclaimed finally,

“and Giovanni is very angry with you. So am I, for I had to feel Il Duca’s pulse, and I did not like it at all. Suppose he had kicked me, seeing that it was not you.”

“Il Duca was dead!” Natale retorted, with a twinkle in his eye, if only Olga could have seen it. “He would not know you from me!”

“Dead!” cried Olga. “I believe you truly do think that, when you set up your crying, Natale; really I did not do it half so well as you,” she confessed honestly.

“But you ‘wheel’ much better than I do,” Natale conceded with ready generosity in return.

“Il Duca did not shut his eyes at all,” Olga went on, nodding assent to Natale’s remark, “and I am sure he *winked* at me, Natale, just to frighten me. It did not take *me* long to feel his pulse! But where were you, Natalino, all the time? Nonna said she was afraid some of the peasants had

stolen you and carried you off, when Niero and Bianco came home without you."

"As if they would have let anybody steal me! Olga, I went to sleep in the church, waiting for the saints to come back, and when I waked it was dark, almost as dark as this!"

"Oho! then you must have been in the church when Arduina and I went in to look at the saints. Arduina said — but you must not dare to tell anybody — she said that she did not believe there were any bones under the saints' fine velvet robes because San Lorenzo had a hand of pink wax, and the rest of him looked rather stuffed. But do not tell Nonna, Natale!"

"Arduina is very wicked," said Natale, but he laughed with Olga, and then felt much better, and as if he could ask about the losing of the money.

They were in a little nook to themselves, behind the wagon, and no one heeded them.

“*Ecco!* it was this way,” Olga began, charmed to be the first to recount the misfortune to Natale, who was usually behind none in his knowledge of the affairs of the company. “Just when Giovanni was going in to do the clown in the first dance on the rope, the Signor Barbera, the stable man, came behind the big tent with his bill for keeping the horses, and Giovanni took the big pocketbook out of the pocket of his coat — ”

“Yes, I know which pocket,” Natale interposed. “I saw him put the money there this morning.”

“Well, the signor could not make the change, so he told Giovanni it was all right, and any time would do, and then Antonio rang the bell for Giovanni, and he just put the pocketbook back in his coat and hung the coat on the nail in the little tent, and hurried on the black coat, and went into the ring.”

“Yes, and then?” asked Natale breathlessly.

“When he came back, he saw his coat on the ground, and he knew he had hung it up. ‘How comes my coat on the ground?’ he said, very loud indeed, and your mamá told him he must have put it there himself. But he did not hear her, because he was shaking the coat and feeling in the pocket, — but there was nothing there!

“We made a great fuss about it,” Olga ended, shrugging her shoulders and throwing up her hands, “but what was the use?”

Natale was silent with dismay. A hundred francs meant so much. It was all that they had made during the ten days’ stay at Cutigliano, and now it was gone, in a moment.

“The stable man?” he questioned in a distressed tone of voice, and very low.

“No, Giovanni said it could not have been

the signor. He is a rich man and honest, everybody says.”

So subdued were they all over the trouble of the afternoon that not even Elvira thought it worth while to scold the quiet boy who presently slipped in among the little crowd of players in the tent, deep in fruitless discussion over their grievous loss. They had had a crowded tent that afternoon, and the receipts had been so good that this evening would have been one of rejoicing if only the money for the labors of the ten other days and nights had been again safe in Giovanni's pocket. There was not the slightest clew to the thief, as no stranger had been known to enter the tent, and Giovanni had even interviewed the Signor Barbera from outside the doorway. It had been necessary to be on the lookout for possible thieving, as the field was crowded all the afternoon with strange peasants, attracted by the band music and the big

yellow tent, and by peddlers with their wares. One very decent-looking peddler had begged pretty, vain Arduina to look at his beautiful jewelry and ribbons, but she had refused him entrance very reluctantly, and Giovanni himself had noticed how patiently and decorously the man had turned away. He had worn a red fez cap over his long black hair, and his bushy black beard had reached nearly to his waist.

“I saw him!” Emilio, one of the musicians exclaimed, “and his legs were as crooked as Pietro’s, only they bent out at the knee instead of in!” There was a laugh at this sally, but Pietro frowned and muttered something about Emilio’s having little right to criticize the legs of others.

“I met such a man as I came out of the church in the crowd,” said Nonna, hastening to speak that a dispute might be avoided. “He walked very well notwithstanding his poor, bent legs, and he asked me if he were

too late to get a glimpse of the blessed relics. A politer man I never saw, though Tito was afraid of him, and began to cry when the man snapped his fingers at him."

Poor Natale felt so left out in the cold with this talk that he could not bear it long, and was just about to creep away, down to his corner in the wagon, when a strange hand lifted a corner of the tent flap, and a strange voice inquired for "*Il piccolo Natale*."

"Some ladies up at the house there have a little present for you all," the black-coated Italian butler of the boarding-house announced, peering in upon the group gathered about the sputtering lamp inside, "but they wish to send it down by the boy, Natale."

Then Natale was himself again, and without demur or bashfulness presented himself to the servant.

"It is well you turned up in time, Na-

talino," said the clown, giving him a little shove toward the dignified butler waiting just outside. "Perhaps Olga would not have done, in this case. Off with you to the *forestieri* ¹ above!"

Many a boy would have been abashed at finding himself the center of such a group as awaited Natale in the hallway of the house in the garden. But Natale was too well accustomed to an array of faces fixed upon him to make the least show of bashfulness. The lady of the house, whose pleasant face he knew very well, laid her hand on his shoulder and asked him kindly in Italian if anything had been heard of the money lost that afternoon, and her soft, dark eyes looked sympathetically into his own.

"No, signora, and my papá says we shall never see a *soldo* of it again," was Natale's prompt answer.

"Ask him if they have any idea of the

¹ Foreigners.

person who stole it," Betty Bishop suggested in English, and Madame Cioche did so. Natale's answer to this was more expressive than polite perhaps, for without words he simply raised his shoulders as high as possible, pressing his elbows against his sides, and spreading his hands wide to indicate the complete ignorance of his people as to the coward who had taken their hard-earned money. And the drawn-down corners of his mouth so changed the expression of his face that one would hardly have known him.

"Who would have believed the child could make himself so ugly," Mrs. Bishop exclaimed. "Have you no tongue, boy, to answer properly?"

But as English words were far less intelligible to Natale than Caffero's whinny, or Niero's bark, he only looked up into Madame Cioche's face and smiled.

"There! it is a bonny little face after

all," said that lady, "and now shall we give him the money and send him away?"

"No, let me speak to him first," demanded Mrs. Bishop, "and you, Mrs. Choky, must interpret. Ask him if he likes to be a wicked little circus boy."

"Aunty!" gasped Betty.

"Never mind, I have a reason for my question, Betty. Hush, what does he say?"

"Do you like to play in the circus, dear?" asked Mrs. Cioche's kind voice, in Italian.

Natale's eyes shone.

"Ah, yes, signora! And when I am a man, I shall be another Antonio Bisbini."

"He says he likes it very much, Mrs. Bishop," was the interpretation.

"Already corrupted, poor boy, and so young!" the old lady sighed, while Betty laughed outright.

"Ask him if he would not like better to have some nice clothes, and go to school,

and grow up to be a decent man some day, Mrs. Choky." That lady hesitated a little before putting this question into Italian.

"What does she say to me?" Natale asked, his brown eyes twinkling as he looked from one to the other, his teeth showing white between his red lips. Natale's was a wide, good-natured mouth, very prone to laugh upon small provocation.

"She wants to know if you would not like to go to school, and learn to read and write," said Madame Cioche.

"And leave the *circo*?" Natale asked with a gasp.

"Yes, you could not go to school unless you should stop in one place, you know."

"And not travel about with the horses and wagon any more, and leave Nonna?"

"Of course, Natale. But she is only asking you about it, *carino*, so do not look so troubled."

Natale laughed then, and happily.

“She wanted to find out how much I love the *circo!*” he exclaimed. “Please tell her, signora. You know, how we all love the *circo!*”

“I think I do, Natale. He does not want to go to school, Mrs. Bishop,” turning to the eager old lady, “because he loves his life with the circus and his own people too much.”

“And he does not wish to leave his grandmother,” chimed in Betty who had very cleverly picked up a good deal of Italian during a winter and summer in Italy, and all grandmothers are Nonnas in that land.

Mrs. Bishop was silent for a moment, her gaze taking in every detail of Natale’s little figure standing sturdily before her, dusty shoes, and rough peasant leggings, velveteen trousers, faded blue blouse, and rumped curls, with the old hat held in one sun-burned hand. His face was not so clean as usual now, and there were tired circles about

his eyes. It had been a long, exciting summer's day.

"Children — especially boys — do not know what is best for themselves," she said presently, bending her brows, but not in the least frightening Natale, "and I am not going to give up my plan, for this baby's nonsense. Why, he cannot be over eight years old, at the most."

"Here, Natale," said Madame Cioche, judging that the interview might well be concluded, and handing the boy a small packet. "Take this to your papá, and tell him that the ladies and gentlemen in my house have heard of the loss of the money, and are sending him thirty-five francs as a little present. Can you carry it safely?"

Again Natale's sweet smile broke over his face, but he only nodded happily in reply, tucking the money away in the bosom of his blouse.

"Ask him how long they are going to

stay," Mrs. Bishop called after Madame Cioche, who was going to the gate with Natale.

"He says that the *sindaco* — the mayor — has offered them the use of the field for another week," Madame Cioche said, her eyes glowing, as she returned to the hall. "I am glad of that, as the poor creatures will need all they can make here, now."

"I call it a sort of punishment, their losing the money when playing on Sunday," Mrs. Bishop said severely, and one or two other English ladies nodded their approval of this speech. "And I think the whole business wrong and that it ought to be discouraged. I was not at all sure about the propriety of giving my francs to your little collection, Mrs. Choky."

"Would it have been more Christian to have let them suffer, perhaps for food, and the poor beasts too?" the hostess asked, pausing on her way through the hall.

“But surely you think circusing wrong and *unchristian*?” the disputative old lady exclaimed.

“Aunty, do be quiet,” cried Betty warmly. “I am sure you ought not to dispute ‘on Sunday’! Besides,” she added, as everybody laughed, and two or three softly applauded, “they make their living that way, and we cannot change them into farmers, or preachers. But I think it is always wrong not to help honest people who are in trouble.”

“If they *are* honest,” Mrs. Bishop remonstrated, but under her breath, this time, for Madame Cioche’s eyes were sparkling, and she seemed waiting to speak.

“Those poor creatures down there deserve nothing but praise,” she said stoutly; “they are quiet folks, who teach their children obedience and keep themselves remarkably clean and mended. If they make their living in a way we do not ap-

prove, we cannot change them, as Miss Betty says, but we can feed them when they are hungry, and that seems to me not 'unchristian' !”

“I am afraid she has a little temper,” said Mrs. Bishop, as their hostess went up-stairs.

“A temper I like !” exclaimed a gentleman who had before kept silent, looking up from his book. “But do you still think of carrying out your plan, Mrs. Bishop ?”

“If possible, certainly,” was the reply, while Betty, shaking her head, walked out into the garden. There, under the stars, she stood looking down upon the tent in the field. There was no wind, and the heavens were fair, so the canvas had not been furled.

“I should like it myself,” she murmured. “What a fascinating life to live ! Camping out the year round in Italy, with no troublesome dressing four times a day, no tiresome *table-d'hôte* dinners at night. But after all

I should not like to be that girl, — Arduina, they call her. Of course, Aunty is right about the rope dancing and other ‘circus-ing’ on Sunday, only she need not be quite so fussy over what we certainly cannot help. Poor Natale! how disturbed he did look when Madame Cioche asked him about going to school!”

CHAPTER VI

SEPARATION

NATALE lay flat on the grass, his face hidden on his arms, and his feet rebelliously kicking the ground. The added week granted by the mayor had passed, and the circus-wagon was about to move on.

“You are only to try it, child, and if it will not do, you can come back to us. One year is not a hundred.”

No reply from Natale.

“You ought to think, sometimes, of how many mouths your stepfather has to fill,” another voice began. “Five children, and not one his own.”

“Why did he marry us then?” fiercely

muttered Natale, but without lifting his head, so perhaps nobody heard.

“You will have new clothes and shoes!”

“And a new hat, Natalino!”

“And you will learn to read much faster than I can teach you 'Lino, with all the practicings and the journeyings. Perhaps you will even learn to be as clever as my Antonio was, before —” Nonna ended with a sigh instead of more words.

The women and girls were in the side tent, busied about dinner, and Nonna would not finish her sentence in the presence of Antonio's wife.

“I would rather be our Antonio than — than the King or the *principino*,”¹ Natale cried helplessly. Then he sat up on the worn grass, and faced them all, tearful but resolute. “I shall not stay here with the priest and go to school, mamá,” he said earnestly. “You shall not leave me be-

¹ Young prince.

hind and take Maria and Pietro and the rest."

"Perhaps we can persuade Giovanni to leave little Bianco with you, if the good priest does not object," Nonna whispered in his ear.

"No, I shall go with you," returned Natale.

"Ah! what is all this?" came suddenly in Giovanni's gruff, good-natured tones. "What? Natale will not stay? The beautiful little star of the ring will not leave us in the darkness?" And the clown entered the tent and flung himself down, laughing, beside the little boy.

"Hurry with the polenta, Arduina," he called to his stepdaughter, who had lifted her hot face from the steam of the mush pot to laugh at the man's rough wit. "The biggest hole yet torn in the tent must be mended this afternoon, and the canvas is almost dry now in this wind. If it had not

rained yesterday, and if the wind had not played us such a trick on the very eve of our going, we should have made our fortunes yesterday. A cattle fair does not offer itself every day, with its crowd of country bumpkins who never saw a man in tights. Now, that will do, Natale,” turning to the boy, who was sniffing audibly. “Hours ago it was all decided, and there is nothing more to be said.”

“Then I am *not* to stay in this horrid place, Giovanni — papá —”

“ ‘Giovanni — papá —!’ No more of these tears, Natalino. You are to stay in this beautiful place, and after polenta, you are to go up to the garden and thank the lady.”

With a loud, rebellious howl, Natale sprang to his feet and rushed out into the open air. Nor did he stop until he stood among the briar bushes below the garden palings. Clenching his small grimy fists, he

stood there looking up toward the many-windowed *pension* and shook them vehemently, while his shrill voice cried out passionately :

“I shall not stay here ! I shall not go to school ! I like my old hat, and I want Nonna to teach me to read. I shall never thank you, *never*, NEVER, NEVER !”

He had seen no one in the garden, and was only addressing the whole houseful of his enemies up there in the big yellow building with the staring windows. Why should they interfere with him ? Why should any one be trying to make him wretched, — the most wretched boy in all Italy ?

“Heyday ! what’s all this about ?” and a white-haired old man, speaking from the garden, came close to the palings and looked over at the small, threatening figure among the bushes. “I cannot understand your gibberish, if you are talking to me. You would better go away now, little boy, or

some of your people will come and whip you."

"How suddenly you stopped the noise, Mr. Grantly," exclaimed Betty, coming up to his side. "Who was it? Why, Aunty's little protégé, Natale! How pitiful he looks, walking away as if his feelings were hurt. You must have frightened him."

"Not a bit of it, ma'am. He frightened *me* with his fierce little voice. It came suddenly, just as I was dropping off to sleep in my chair. It is a relief to have them moving on this afternoon, with their horns and drum. But that boy stays, some one tells me. Is it possible that the family agreed to give him up? I have understood that the Italians cling to each other as much as even we do in America or England. Do they really leave the child?"

"For more money than he could ever bring them by his somersaulting, yes,"

Betty answered. "Sometimes I think Aunty really does not know what to do with her money," the girl went on confidentially to the old gentleman, who was listening with interest. "Now, that boy has no desire to be taken away from 'the evil life he is leading' in Aunty's estimation, and he does not wish to be sent to school and become 'a decent man.'"

"Ah! tell me the whole plan, now. I heard something of it a few days ago."

"It is very simple — all but getting Natale to agree to being imposed upon," Betty went on a little vexedly. "Aunty has had the stepfather and the mother up here several times this past week to be talked to, and an old woman who seems to be the grandmother of them all. Miss Lorini has done all the interpreting, and also saw the priest about it, as Madame Cioche would not. They have agreed to leave Natale here for one year; he is to be taken care of by the

priest's mother, and to be sent to school and made 'decent,' poor little fellow."

Mr. Grantly laughed, but said nothing, for his heart was still young and understanding of boyish hearts, if his head was white, and he felt a wise interest in Mrs. Bishop's philanthropic scheme.

"Aunty is to pay everything, and she says she thinks she knows now why all the hotels up at Abetone were full so she could not get a good room there for these three weeks. She finds that she was 'ordained' to rescue a boy from his persecutors, as she persists in calling the circus men. It is supposed, I believe, that all little boys and girls of circuses have been stolen from kind parents, and if not are half-killed with cruelty by their own."

"You speak very warmly, young lady," Mr. Grantly remarked, a little reproof in his tone. "There is no doubt that many such children do suffer and are very unhappy."

“Those certainly do not !” retorted Betty, pointing to a number of the circus children frolicking in the field with Niero and Bianco. Olga’s red cotton dress was flitting over the grass, and her merry laugh was echoed by the other little ones, as Niero finally caught her red skirts in the chase.

“Of course the clown objected at first,” Betty continued, “but Aunty was more determined than he and soon proved to him that it would be worth his while to agree. The old lady, whom they call Nonna, was curiously anxious for Natale to have a chance at schooling. I wondered at that till I heard about her son.”

“Yes, I know,” Mr. Grantly assented. “Some, however, would think he had made a very fair exchange in giving up the future of a priest for the easy, out-of-doors life of an acrobat. There is no accounting for tastes, though. And is this boy to be made a priest ?”

“Only let my Aunty hear you say that !”

laughed the girl. "No, indeed, but the priest was the only one who would agree to be troubled with the child, after Miss Lorini had explained all Aunty's conditions — how Natale was to have a cold bath every morning, meat to eat every day, and new shoes as soon as his old ones come into holes. The priest, too, has agreed to write a letter to Aunty every month to tell her of Natale's progress —"

"Toward growing into a 'decent man' "? interposed Mr. Grantly. "Well, I hope the plan will work well for all parties. Few Italian peasant lads get such a chance." Then the old gentleman went back to his chair to continue his nap.

All that afternoon, until four o'clock, there was an unusual bustle going on about the little encampment. The tattered, damp, half-ruined canvas was rolled up and packed along with poles and planks and ropes on a small cart hired for this oc-

casion, while the cooking utensils and the scant furniture of the tents were gathered together for conveyance in the house-wagon. It was a cold and dreary day, following the night of stormy wind, with the clouds settling close about the mountain tops and the wind sweeping down the valley wet with rain. And in the heart of Natale there was even less promise of sunshine. He sat apart from the others on the damp wall, frowning and sullen.

Half an hour before, he had been almost forcibly dragged up the hill to the house in the garden by Giovanni, who had made little jokes to hide the sulkiness of the boy's replies to the questions of the ladies gathered there. Madame Cioche had promptly hidden herself when she saw the green gate open and the pair coming in, but the clown had walked directly through the hall and up to the little table where Mrs. Bishop sat taking her tea.

No command of Giovanni nor persuasion of Miss Lorini, who was an artist, could induce Natale to say: "Thank you, signora, for your kindness." His revolt had been beforehand hushed into silence by some very plain threats of punishment by his mother, but nothing could make him say that he was glad to stay in Cutigliano and go to school every day.

He stood before them all, miserable as a child could be, his face very clean and pale, and a new pair of shoes already upon his feet. They pinched his toes woefully, but his heart ached more than his feet.

"You will love the signora very much, some day, when you are a man and remember how good she was to the poor little boy who knew nothing but how to turn somersaults," Miss Lorini had said caressingly in her softest Italian, studying the piteous face meanwhile with an eye to painting it some day, when it should smile again.

"I shall learn to do something besides the *capitomboli*,¹ when I am a man," Natale had said eagerly. "I shall be like our Antonio some day." Perhaps these foreigners would be willing to leave him in peace if he could convince them that he *wished* to be a strolling player all his life.

"He speaks as if he does not exactly understand," said Miss Lorini, looking at Giovanni inquiringly. "Does he not know that he is to give up the circus now?"

Giovanni shrugged his shoulders, then shook Natale's slender shoulder, muttering:

"No more of your silly talk, boy!" Then louder, "If you will not thank the lady, I do, with all my heart." And with that he bowed low, then pushing Natale before him, went quickly away. He was, in secret, rather sorry for the boy, who had never before given any trouble with foolish willfulness, and who had moreover such high

¹ Somersaults.

ambitions! It did seem a stupid life to which they were leaving the poor child, but then there was to be considered the roll of money already sewed into his own belt, with more to accumulate there, if Natale should be left still another year with the priest Luigi. If rich *forestieri* had nothing else to do with their money but give it away in this frantic fashion, the stepfather was not unwilling to share the bounty, and Elvira, the mother, had seemed not to mind.

So now Natale sat alone on the wall, feeling very much out of it all, and longing to hear some one say, "Natalino, do fetch me this", or "Carry that"; but no one said anything of the kind. They seemed to feel that he was no longer one of them, and his little heart swelled to breaking.

He was too young to long harbor ill-will and of too sunny a spirit to sulk for many minutes at a time, so presently he slipped off the wall and ran to meet Olga, who was

struggling over to the traveling house-on-wheels, dragging two stools behind her. The very last things were being done, and already the horses were standing by, ready to be hitched at the last moment.

“Do let me carry the stools, Olga,” Natale pleaded with unwonted entreaty in his voice. “Well, one of them, then.”

“I am sorry you are going to stay behind here, Natalino,” the little girl panted. “Why do you? I should run after the wagon if I were you!”

Natale had never thought of such a simple thing to do by way of escape! He promptly set down the stool he had grasped and looked fixedly away from Olga’s red-brown eyes.

Alas! in that critical moment, what did he see approaching from the village? The flat, broad-brimmed hat and flowing black skirts of a priest, descending the street and turning in at the field!

There was then not a moment to be lost ! Forgetting Olga and the heavy stools, Natale turned and fled, away — anywhere — out of sight of the jailor advancing. Everything flashed out of his mind except the impulse to escape, to hide himself from those searching eyes under the felt hat brim. His flying feet skimmed across the field, and when they had borne him out of sight down the nearest slope, Natale flung himself on the ground under a thicket of thorny blackberry bushes.

He lay there for what must have been a long time, for, after a while, a sudden shower of rain swept down the valley and for a few minutes enveloped everything in a gray mist. Even after it had passed, Natale delayed returning to the wagon until the priest should have quite gone, in despair of capturing his prisoner. When at last he did venture forth, and crept to the upper verge of the slope, his first

glance was across the field for the brown wagon.

It was not there !

He set out in a headlong run for the place where it had stood. There was nothing left — absolutely nothing. Only a priest sat quietly waiting in a gap in the wall.

Natale, with eyes only for the deserted spot, came stumbling upon the man, without so much as seeing that he was there, and then the priest rose, and taking the boy's hand, spoke with the utmost quietness.

“Come home with me now, Natalino,” was what he said, and Natale heard as one hears dream voices.

Poor child ! If he had only listened, he might have heard the dull screeching of the brakes as the wagon crawled carefully down the hill toward the arched bridge, and it would have been an easy matter to snatch his hand from the limp grasp of the priest

and go hurrying down the short cuts in pursuit. But his head seemed so full of a hundred roaring noises that he could not hear, and his heart beat so fast that he could not speak, and so up the hill he went at the priest's side.

Nor did he see the quiet smile upon Luigi's shaven lips, as they passed the green gate of the garden where Betty stood peering through. She would not have spoken to the boy just then for all the world, and as for Madame Cioche, she could not have done so if she had wished. She gazed down from her latticed window, her bright eyes dimmed as they fell upon the little caged bird of the fields fluttering by.

CHAPTER VII

THE CAGED BIRD OF THE FIELDS

THERE is a short, crooked street in Cutigliano, which leads back of the church and out upon the promenade of San Vito. This street is confined on either hand by stone houses and stone walls of gardens, and paved with large square stones. Here and there a gateway gives a peep at lapping hills across the river. The massive church tower rises directly from a narrow turn in this street, and when the bells ring down from the arches in the top of this tower, the stony street reverberates with a deafening clamor.

By the time the priest and Natale reached the foot of the church tower, the boy was weeping bitterly but quietly. His one free

arm hid as much of his face as possible, and his feet in the clumsy new shoes stumbled so helplessly that Luigi had some trouble in preventing his falling.

As they had passed through the town, where everybody sat at their doors or lounged in the *piazza*, all had recognized the little acrobat, as Natale realized only too well. Many accosted him in wonder, and some would even have stopped him to inquire into his misfortune in being left behind by his family. But the young priest motioned such away with authority, silencing with a gesture of his long finger the too curious. Others had already learned how it had come about that Natale was to spend a year with Sora Grazia, and her son the priest, and these contented themselves with shrugs and smiles for the boy's companion, as who should say: "We wish you well of your bargain, Signor priest."

The great hands of the church clock

pointed to ten minutes of four, as the bell boomed the hour of six. No one, however, ever thought of consulting the huge figures painted on the stone face of the tower clock, for those long iron hands had not stirred for many a day.

The deep sound of the bell struck so suddenly upon Natale's ears that he started, and dropping his arm from before his eyes, gazed dully ahead. It was not often that he had strayed farther than this corner of the old church, and he had never followed the San Vito promenade to the end. Most of the town was left behind now; whither could this man be taking him?

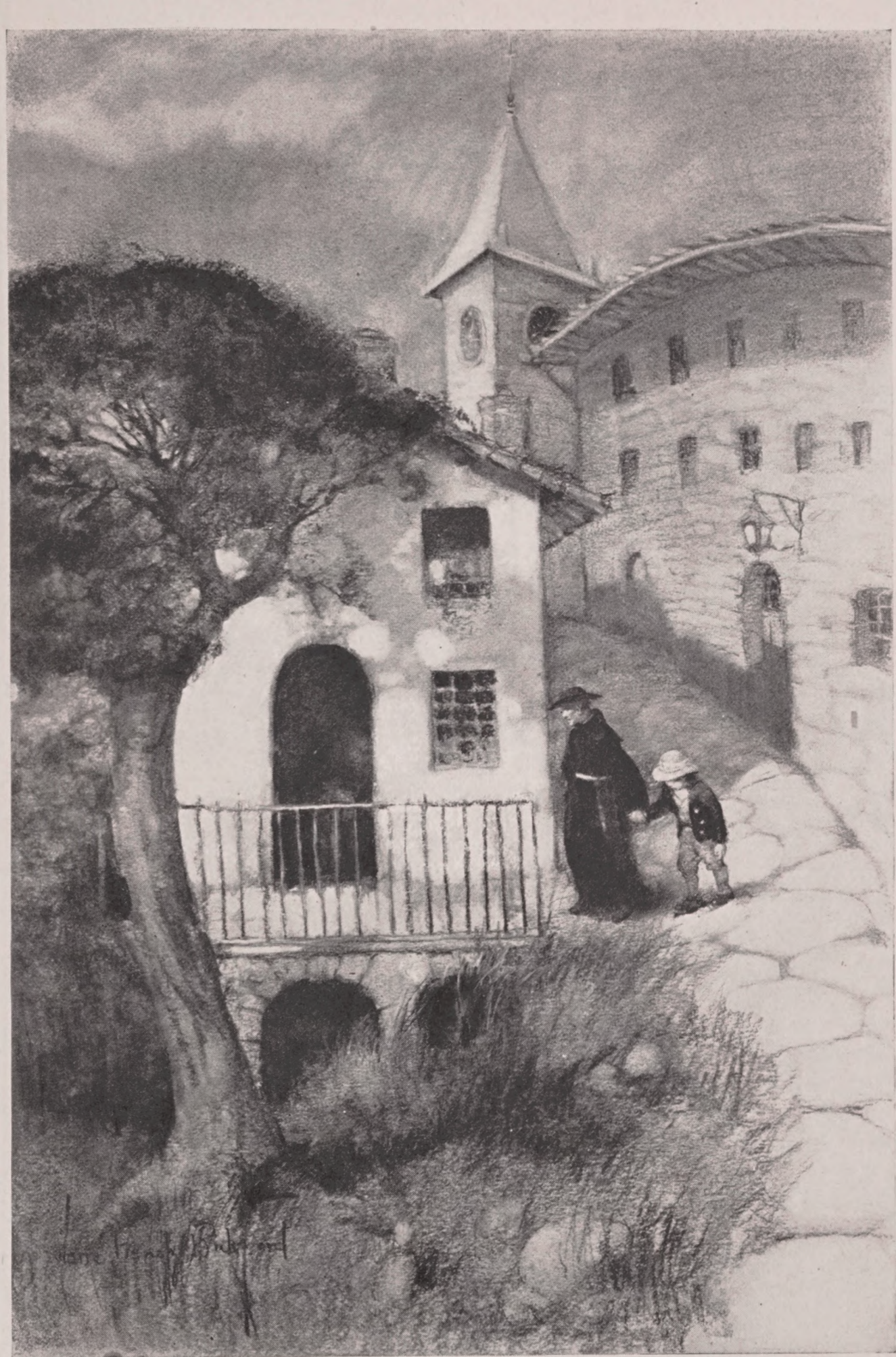
A row of houses with numbers in blue figures on one side of the lintels extended back of the church, but before none of these did Luigi pause. Next came a low, broken wall, and then a house, detached from its neighbors and with a long, sloping roof, covered with slabs of slate. This

house had no door opening on the street, and in the blank front wall there was only a very small window at one corner close under the eaves. Over a door in the end of the house nearest the church there was a small crucifix in carved stone set into the wall, but this door was seemingly closed and unused.

The priest led Natale a few steps farther, to the other end of the house, and then they left the street and entered a long balcony leading to a wide-open door.

A middle-aged woman sat just inside this doorway at the foot of a flight of stairs leading up into the room under the roof. She wore a kerchief of red and black cotton over her head and tied in a knot under her chin, and her eyes were bent upon a coarse piece of mending occupying her work-worn hands.

At Luigi's heavy step on the stone flooring of the balcony, she lifted her face to his and



The priest led Natale to the other end of the house. *Page 94.*

something like a smile softened the expression of her stern features. Her black brows unbent and she made way for her son to enter by twisting her stool slightly and shifting her feet. Luigi passed by her and took up his stand in the gathering gloom of the little passage, his eyes fixed warily upon Natale. The little boy had released his hand from the priest's outside the door, and now stood leaning against the railing of the balcony, staring frowningly at the woman.

"You are content to have it over with, Gigi?" the mother asked, glancing from man to boy and back again.

Luigi nodded his head.

"Give him something to eat and put him to bed," he counseled in a low tone, "and do not argue with him to-night. Tomorrow the sun will shine and he will begin to forget."

Natale's sharp ears caught every word,

stolid as he looked. "Forget?" What did they think he would forget? Not Olga's last words, certainly: "I would run after the wagon, if I were you."

But, *why was he not running now?* No door, as yet, kept him prisoner. There was the empty street. Below ran the long, long white road. The night was coming down, and he was not afraid of the dark. Once out of sight, around one of the loops of the road, it would take but a moment to slip off the heavy shoes with their soles half an inch thick, and then on and on in the cool darkness he might run on light bare feet — "after the wagon."

He thrilled with the thought as it flashed through his mind, but a flash of the same thought thrilled Sora Grazia at the same time, for just then she leaned forward and laying her hand on Natale's arm, she drew him to her side.

"Once I had a curly-haired little boy of

my own," she said with a serious smile, "but after a while, he grew to be a man, and now he has brought to me another little boy. Natalino, I hope you will be as good a boy as my Gigi ever was."

Natale gazed earnestly into the woman's face.

"I am not at all good, signora," he said unsteadily, and he could not help the stirring of hope in his heart, with this confession, but Sora Grazia only smiled again and tapped his cheek, and said that perhaps the good Luigi would teach him to be good.

And there was no more opportunity left Natale for running away, for he was presently led into the kitchen where he had to sit and watch Sora Grazia prepare the macaroni for supper. He was hungry enough to enjoy a plateful of this but the slip of boiled beef served him on a clean plate afterward could not be choked down. He had overheard some one in the tent —

could it have been only that very day? — say that he was to have meat every day in his new home, and his sister, Arduina, had added that she wished *she* were sure of getting a morsel three times a week. Had not a doctor in Sicily said that she must have all delicate and nourishing food? And what were dry bread and sour wine as substitutes? No, Natale could not eat the meat that night. Happily the plate of macaroni had been generous, and what in all the land of sunny Italy is so filling as a plate of macaroni?

The valley looked dismally dark that night, as Natale crept from his little trestle bed and crouched on the brick floor at the window, after he was supposed to be asleep. He was to share the priest's attic chamber, and a few moments before Sora Grazia had carried away the candle. He peered out between the flower pots on the window ledge and again wondered in his childish

way why anybody in the big world outside should have troubled to make him miserable.

He was very sure that he had done nothing to harm the foreign lady with the spectacles. Once he had laughed when she had sneezed many times very loudly, in crossing the field near him, but he was sure no one had heard him, for he was lying on the ground and had buried his face in the grass. The pretty signorina with her had laughed too, and said something in their strange language which the lady had answered by another loud sneeze. Besides this, there was absolutely nothing he could have done to provoke any of the people in the garden. Yet, here he was being punished!

The thought of Sora Grazia oppressed him, her serious face and her high hopes of his goodness. The house, too, was quieter than any place he had ever known, — he who had been used to few roofs save those of the caravan and tent. There were no

children about, and there was no sound inside of crying, or laughing, or singing, or whistling. It was almost as bad as having to live in a solemn church when the candles are all out and the crowds are gone, and one feels, in the dimness and silence, as if something were coming up stealthily behind one to scare one's wits away. It is all very well to rest for a minute in a cool church, out of the glare of the sunlight, when one may run out again at will, free as a wild bird or butterfly. But to have to stay, night and day, for a whole year in such a place! Natale shuddered, for this was just the way in which the awful quiet of the little stone house of the priest affected him.

When Luigi came up to bed, hours later, he lifted the sleeping boy from the bricks at the window and covered him up snugly in bed.

"My mother thinks we can do it," he muttered to himself, as he threw off his

black gown. "I shall do my part, but I am not sure they have done a wise thing." Then he sighed a little. Perhaps he was wishing that he could be a little boy again, with the wide, wide world before him, and no one to interfere with his choice of a career, — free to be acrobat or priest, but always to have his own choice.

With the passing of the first night all idea of running away seemed to have left Natale's mind, and Sora Grazia was at first delighted to find her charge as submissive as a lamb to all her arrangements. After the first day or two, however, it became not quite so comfortable to see the little boy sit immovable for hours at a time, on the floor of the balcony, gazing down into the valley where the river ran merrily over the rocks. She would even have preferred to rebuke the child for something a little more outrageous than his listless torpor. She herself had to eat the meat prepared for

Natale, if she would not see it wasted, for Natale could not touch it, nor would Luigi, her usually tractable son.

The young priest was no less puzzled over Natale's conduct than his mother was. The schoolmaster reported to him that the boy held his little paper-covered spelling-book before his eyes with the utmost diligence, and really seemed to try to remember the letters as they were pointed out to him with patient repetition, but that he might as well have been gazing off into the valley instead, for all the good the pages did him, and Luigi believed it.

The other boys tried to lure him into their games and to practice his funny *capitomboli* but he would only sit quietly by, on the stone steps of the church, watching them till playtime was over, when he must sit up on the bench in the schoolroom again and hold his book before his eyes.

“He cannot keep up his sulking forever,”

Sora Grazia said on the sixth day of Natale's stay with her. Luigi was standing near her in the balcony, brushing the dust from the skirts of his long gown, which he shook vigorously with his strong hands, as his mother continued, "I confess that I am surprised he has taken things so quietly."

"A little too quietly!" muttered Luigi into the folds of his gown.

"But now, one would like to see him brighten up a little instead of glooming over his food and everything else," Sora Grazia went on. "He is not the same child he was a week ago, making his ridiculous *capitomboli* over the circus carpet. I wonder if he could turn a somersault now, Luigi." The woman lifted her head from her work to look over at Natale, who sat on the low street wall with his feet dangling into the road.

"I gave him leave to go and play with the boys down in the field, this afternoon,"

said Luigi, shaking his gown almost viciously. "He said he did not wish to go where his tent had been, and that he never expected to turn a somersault again."

"Impertinent!" exclaimed Sora Grazia. "We'll let him alone a while longer, and he'll come all right. A child cannot sulk forever, as I said before."

"But one can die of starvation and homesickness, perhaps," quoth Luigi, stepping past his mother and springing up the stairs, his gown upon his arm.

Grazia's retort was stayed upon her lips by what she now saw passing in the street.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAGE DOOR OPENED

NATALE, too, was looking up, but only dully, as a party of ladies and gentlemen sauntered toward him laughing and talking gayly as they came. Many such groups had passed him already, taking afternoon strolls toward the beautiful promenade of San Vito leading around the mountain side. But this particular group paused, when a spectacled old lady did, and all gathered about Natale, except the white-haired gentleman standing a little aloof and tapping the paving stones with his stick.

“Why haven’t you been to see us, Natale Marzuchetti?” Miss Lorini asked cheer-

fully in Italian. "Mrs. Bishop was sure you would come."

"He does not look like the same child!" whispered Betty to her aunt, who now pushed forward.

"Ask him if he is a *smart* boy in school, and if he is not *glad* to be dressed so decently and to be learning something *useful*," Mrs. Bishop said hurriedly to the Italian lady, all of which was repeated to Natale in his own language as was requested. But Natale only shook his head slowly and wistfully.

"You used to talk fast enough!" Mrs. Bishop cried impatiently. "Look," she went on, pointing to the next house, a little farther on, "don't you see that white stone in the wall? The words on it tell about a man who was born there, two hundred and fifty years ago, who was so good and useful that the people here put his name up there that he might never be forgotten. What's

to hinder there being a stone put up on this house, to tell about little Natale who was only a poor circus boy, but who came to live here when he was eight years old and became a very useful and good man? Tell him, Miss Lorini, just what I say!" And Mrs. Bishop pointed from the memorial tablet in one house to the blank front wall of the other, while Luigi, peering out of his window between the flower pots, dodged behind a tall geranium, and hoped the sharp eyes of the old lady were not searching for him.

Natale listened gravely to Miss Lorini's communication, his eyes passing carelessly from the memorial tablet to the wall of an opposite house.

There was a rude painting on this wall of a Madonna holding a baby in her arms, and it was protected from the weather by a shallow arch of masonry. As Natale looked at the picture, he was reminded in some

mysterious way of Nonna, who was never without a child in her arms, unless she were bending over a fountain washing the children's clothes. A new look sprang into his eyes.

"Our Antonio had *his* name printed in Egypt and in Turkey and in Greece!" he answered proudly, for the first time opening his lips. "I would rather be like that than have my name cut here on the priest's house!"

"Good for the little chap," cried the gentleman softly. He had understood what the shrill little voice said.

"Printed on what, child? What was 'our Antonio's' name printed on, in all those places?" Miss Lorini asked.

"On paper, of course," answered the child simply. "And there were pictures of him too, all red and yellow and blue, performing on the bars. Everybody in the streets was looking at his name and the pictures."

The little fellow's face was glowing as he spoke of his friend, and Miss Lorini had not the heart to translate his words to Mrs. Bishop, who could hardly have passed them by calmly.

"But you are content here?" Betty managed to ask in intelligible Italian.

The shadow fell again over Natale's face, and his figure visibly drooped. He did not pretend to answer her question.

"Oh, Aunty, let him go back to his people," Betty pleaded, seeing the change. "Anybody can see that he is miserable. He is too little to be made to suffer."

"He is too little to suffer long," Mrs. Bishop replied calmly, with but one thought in her mind, of course.

"Poor little Egyptian!" sighed the gentleman. "He was born in Egypt, was he not, Miss Betty?"

"At Port Said, yes, and Pietro in Tunis they say."

“Well, be a good boy, Natale,” said Mrs. Bishop, patting his head, in its new cap. “Then you will be happy. In a few days, I shall send for you to come to see me, and we will drink tea in the garden. Good-by! *Addio!*”

Natale touched his hat, as he had long ago been taught to do, and the pedestrians moved away, all but the gentleman who had called him a “little Egyptian.”

He stood for a moment at Natale’s side, with his back turned to the house and his departing friends, and in a trice a handful of copper coins was transferred from his pocket to Natale’s hands. Mr. Grantly had just had a paper note changed into small coins, at the fruit shop, and he was glad to relieve his pocket of some of its weight.

“I hope his guardians will let him keep the money,” was his thought as he turned away from Natale’s brilliant smile of thanks. The boy’s training had made him none too

proud to accept the money of a stranger, and he lost no time in stowing it away in his jacket pocket, while Mr. Grantly hurried after the echoing steps of his party.

Luigi at the window above had seen the money given to Natale, but he asked no questions of the boy, who, after kicking his heels against the wall for some time longer, was presently called to his supper.

There was a flush on Natale's cheeks and a brightness in his eyes which even Sora Grazia noticed, and as the evening was cool, she thought it wise to forbid his sitting out on the balcony or the wall, as was his wont, until bedtime. He looked feverish, she said, and in her own mind she planned a cup of hot camomile tea as a remedy at bedtime. Natale's disappointment at this command to keep indoors showed so plainly upon his childish features that Sora Grazia was provoked, and for the first time since the boy had been with her she used harsh tones.

“There! you may as well go to bed at once!” she cried, as he was leaving the kitchen, without a word it is true, but with the light all gone from his face. “I can never please you, whatever I do, and you are here only to waste food and sulk. Go to bed, Natale!”

Luigi had gone off directly after eating his supper, about some matter of business with one of his superiors at the church, so he was not there to take Natale’s part.

It is hard enough to be sent to bed on an ordinary night and at one’s regular time, as any child will agree, but to be forbidden the early hours of a moonlit evening outdoors, especially when one’s little head is teeming with wild, delicious ideas of flight—away from daily baths, from the cramping walls of a house, and out into the freshness and freedom of the night, which has no terror for the dwellers in tents, was well-nigh unbearable.

Ah ! how little Sora Grazia knew of the anguish she was causing !

But Natale obediently stumbled slowly upstairs in the dark to the bedroom, and when there, crouched in his usual place on the floor behind the flower pots without an audible murmur.

The little acrobat had made no plans at all, but with the touch of the money given him by the kind old gentleman on San Vito, an impulse to seek his freedom had occurred to his mind, and in the half-hour while he continued on the wall, furtively handling the coins in his pocket, he had wished, — only wished, however, — that he might have the courage to steal out into the moonlight, after eating, while Sora Grazia should be about her dish-washing, and Luigi poring over one of his little black books, perhaps, by the light of the candle in the kitchen. He had often thought of Olga's words, "I would run after the wagon, if I were you," but he

had been too closely watched during the first day or two to admit of his carrying out so bold a plan, and since then, for the rest of the long, dreary week since the caravan had gone, he had not had the spirit to undertake such a measure. The whole world seemed to intervene between himself and the beloved company who had gone, and he felt sure that he would be seen by some mistaken person and brought back, even before he could reach the river, if he should attempt to follow.

Until to-night no thought of leaving under the protection of the friendly darkness had come to him, and he had only been able to see himself flying down the sunny road in full view of all the village, to be promptly turned back again by some carriage driver of the place, or some schoolboy bigger than himself and therefore stronger. Besides, he had had no money, and Natale had traveled enough to know that a few cents

in one's pocket make one's road easier and less long. So the days had passed, and Natale was fast drifting into a state of listless torpor which must have ended in illness, had not Mr. Grantly changed a five-franc note at the fruit shop that sunny afternoon and taken a stroll along San Vito where Natale sat "sulking" on the wall!

Presently, as the little child continued to gaze longingly out into the moonlight, a ray of further hope illumined his mind. As Luigi had gone to the church now, it would be late before he would return. Sora Grazia always sat dozing on her stool in the doorway until time for barring the door and going to bed. Why should he not slip past her and away into the shadows of the street, before Luigi should return? His heart leaped at the thought, and he rose noiselessly to his feet and glanced around the darkening room. His small cot stood smooth and white against the wall. An-

other thought struck him, and he quailed with a sense of utter discouragement. When Luigi should come in, — and he might be very early, one never knew, — the runaway would be missed straightway from the empty little bed, and easily overtaken if he should have taken the regular road down the hill.

It is true there were paths innumerable down the terraces from the back of almost any house in the street, most of them probably leading down to the river far below, but Natale had been no explorer of the neighborhood during his week of captivity, and was ignorant of the precipitate windings and the final ending of even the most practicable of these. No, he must go by the road, and he must wait until Luigi should return, and get to bed and to sleep.

Natale knew that the priest slept soundly, for, one night he had had the misfortune to knock over upon the floor a pot containing

a carnation plant, and the crash had not awakened Luigi. The boy had waked and had gone to the window to peer out into the night, fancying that he heard the hoarse creaking of the caravan brake as the clumsy vehicle crawled down the hill, and in craning his head between the pots, his elbow had pushed over one of them. Fortunately, neither pot nor plant had broken, and he had spent a good deal of time in packing the loosened earth about the carnation's roots and replacing the pot among its fellows. The next morning, Sora Grazia had bidden him be more careful about carrying mud upstairs on his shoes, only to be cleaned up by her afterward, and he supposed he must have left some of the earth upon the floor, in the dim light.

At any rate, Luigi slept soundly, and if he, himself, could only manage to keep awake until all was safe, he knew that he would have no difficulty in unbarring the

door. He had accomplished it unaided only that morning, with Sora Grazia standing by and saying that it was the first thing of use he had set his hands to do since coming there to live. She had spoken good-naturedly though, and Natale had nothing against her. No, not even now did he remember her late harsh words, for he was too sweet-natured to harbor malice. He had only suffered, and now there was a prospect of escaping more suffering of the same kind.

So after sitting on his bed with a wild turmoil of thoughts engaging his busy little brain, he began rapidly to undress. Luigi must not find him up! But, after taking off the strong new suit of clothes which Mrs. Bishop had had made for him, he rummaged under his mattress where his old things had been stored by Sora Grazia and quickly got into the worn trousers, the faded blouse and leggings, tucking the old shoes under his pillow. He had set the new

shoes and stockings in orderly fashion on the floor and folded up the new clothes and laid them at the foot of the little cot. How fortunate that his old shoes had not been thrown away, for he could hardly have traveled barefoot over the flinty stones of the road and the river. Natale chose to wear the old easy shoes, for the new ones had always hurt him, and he would not have been able to steal unheard out of the house with those heavy, creaking soles tramping over the bricks. If he had known of the long way ahead of the old worn shoes, perhaps he would have planned to carry the despised footgear in his hands. But forethought had little place in the mind of so young a runaway, and he was guided in his change of clothes only by his own desires for comfort. The old clothes were as familiar as old friends, and therefore he preferred them.

Then, after making his preparations, not forgetting to change the money from the

pocket of the new jacket to that of his old trousers, he laid himself down on the cot, and drew up the light covering snugly about his shoulders, devoutly hoping that he would not fall soundly asleep.

If Natale had only known it, Sora Grazia, believing Natale safe for the night, had slipped off for a gossip with a friend living just back of the church, simply drawing the door to behind her and leaving the coast clear for flight. And it would not have been difficult for the boy to leave a semblance of himself tucked under the bed covering, in the shape of the roll of discarded clothes and shoes ! But little Natale was not possessed of a very designing brain, and after all, Luigi *might* have come in untimely, and spoiled it all !

In a few moments, the would-be runaway was fast asleep, while the moon sailed across the valley from the eastern toward the western sky.

CHAPTER IX

THE FLIGHT OF THE BIRD

WHEN Natale next opened his eyes he became very wide awake indeed, in an instant.

In fact, he did not know that he had been asleep at all, until the moonlight, slanting in, showed Luigi's long body stretched upon the iron bed close by.

What could have waked Natale? For a moment he lay still without recollection of the momentous plans made at his early bedtime. Then he recalled a sensation of icy cold water about his feet, and he remembered that he had dreamed of a sudden plunge into the river while trying to find the stepping-stones. It must have been the chill of the dream-water that had awakened

him! He sat up and found that he was still dressed and in his old clothes.

Ah! it was easy to remember all now, and after a breathless glance over his shoulder at Luigi, who was comfortably snoring, Natale slipped out of bed. Catching up his old hat and his shoes he stole softly over the brick floor and down the stone stairs as quietly as any mouse would have done.

Sora Grazia slept downstairs, but the door of her room was mercifully closed, and Natale knew that she often locked it at night. He turned his back upon it, therefore, with confidence, as he felt in the darkness for the balcony door. He exerted all his strength to raise the heavy bar of iron which guarded the door. Then he was very careful to keep his hold on the bar, as it swung downward, lest it should rouse the house with its usual clanging fall. The huge key was in the lock, and Natale succeeded

in turning it with both hands, although this was much more difficult than raising the bar above the lock. It creaked dully as it turned, and Natale's heart leaped into his throat, and a dozen noises buzzed in his ears.

Breathless, he stood with his hand on the latch, afraid to move lest the door behind him should open, and everything come to an end. But nothing happened, so he swung open the door, and without stopping to close it behind him, he again caught up his shoes, which he had had to set down, and ran along the balcony and out into the street, his feet pattering softly on the stones.

In his haste he did not stop to think of the direction he should take. His only impulse was to get out into the night somewhere, away from the houses and street. So he ran swiftly along in the shadow cast by wall and house, in just the opposite

direction from that which would have led him past the church tower and through the village, out upon the downward road. Presently he crouched in a shadow to draw on his shoes, then fled onward again.

Once away, he lost his bearings utterly and hurried on without turning, past the small house with the Madonna painted on the wall, past the large house where the white tablet to "Pietro Pacioni" gleamed in the moonlight, and then downward, by a roughly paved path leading to the Campo Santo. Perhaps he would have kept on aimlessly along San Vito, — the fashionable promenade leading always higher along the mountain side till it ended in an open plateau high up above the valley, — if he had not heard steps approaching. Whether these steps came from behind or from ahead he did not stop to discover. The downward path offered safety, and a small pink villa threw a dark shadow across its entrance, so

Natale lost not an instant in scudding down the friendly by-way.

On he trotted, past the shrine where the tiny Della Robbia Madonna sits under her arch, the moonlight touching the shining blue of her hood, the yellow of her robe and the pink of the baby on her knees with a radiance that was almost startling on the edge of the shadow. Now the path grew level, and the stones were left behind, and no more noise of footsteps disturbed the quiet.

A few rods more, and Natale stood in front of the small mortuary chapel outside the cemetery. The iron gates set in the wall of the cemetery were locked, as Natale found on gently shaking them. He had paused to peep through the slender grating into the inclosure where the moonlight touched the white tomb of the foreign gentleman buried close under the wall, and showed so plainly the numbers on the low

stakes marking the graves of the nameless poor. The shadows of the cypress trees lay like long black fingers outstretched upon the wilds of weedy undergrowth, and the wind stirred dismally on the exposed hillside.

One day, Natale and Olga had wandered together as far as these iron gates. He remembered it now, and with the recollection he sprang away, eager to continue his journey, — then stood still, uncertain as to his path.

The way which had brought him downward came to an abrupt end with the little chapel, outside the gates. It would not do to lose himself among the chestnut woods in search of a path ! Yet, how could he plunge down the pathless slopes among the great trees, with nothing to guide him but the murmur of the river far below ? Still less was he willing to return to the road above and turn about to take his way through the village and so on out upon the road. He

was almost sure that if he could only see to find his way, some downward path from where he stood would bring him to a river crossing, perhaps a long, long way below the arched bridge, and therefore much farther on his journey.

Bewildered and tired, he was almost ready to give up his flight, and to creep into the dark portico of the little chapel, and back into the shade beneath the picture of the Saint with the skull in his hand, and there end this strange night, which already seemed to him longer than any night he had ever known. But he roused himself to one more effort, and crept around to the back wall of the chapel. There, to his joyful surprise, he came upon a semblance of a path !

All indecision was gone now, and he fairly slid down the rocky and precipitous way, which was more gully than footway, being in fact a watercourse for the torrents leaping

down the mountain side, after some storm of rain, as well as a short cut to the river for roughly shod peasant feet.

More than once Natale stumbled, and once he fell headlong, bruising his hands and knees, but he did not mind, for the rushing of the little river down among the rocks was becoming very loud in his ears.

When at last he came out of the woods, and stood on the edge of the waste of rounded stones loosely paving the river bed, he looked back a moment to where the village must be, high above, a huddle of gray wall and roof, with the square church tower in its midst. All seemed as silent in the sleeping town as in the home of the sleeping dead on its outskirts. Then, just as Natale again turned his back upon the mountain side, where perched Cutigliano like a bit of gray lichen growing on some mossy boulder, the beautiful, bright, friendly moon slipped quite over the mountain in the west, and

darkness fell upon the valley, where deep down in its darkest shadow Natale was ready to cross the river. The light of the moon still touched the chestnut woods higher up the slopes, but every moment the shadow would be creeping higher and higher, until there would be no more moonlight on this side the mountain, and only the stars would come peeping out at Natale.

After slipping off his shoes and leggings, the boy began picking his way carefully over the large dry stones which were worn smooth and round by slow wasting in the wet seasons, when the river flooded its narrow course and spread to the grassy banks. The stones rolled under even his light footsteps, but Natale kept his balance in crossing the smaller stones, and clambered patiently over or around the largest ones, and presently arrived at the edge of the black, rushing water. The brawling Lima makes a great ado hereabouts, as it tumbles

over the rocks, for its bed slopes decidedly all the way to Lucca and beyond, and there is no opportunity for it to moderate its pace, or calm its chafings against the rocks.

With the first touch of the icy water upon his bared feet, Natale recalled his dream. How long ago it had been since he had lain safely in his bed under the slanting roof of Luigi's house! Again and again he tried to plant his foot firmly in the midst of the swirling water, which was perhaps as much as twenty feet wide at that point, but always it was deeper and colder than he had expected, and the stones more slippery and unsteady. Then he began wandering up and down the bank, in quest of the stepping-stones, which here and there certainly crossed the river both above and below the arched bridge. Unsuccessful in this, Natale finally exerted himself to make a reckless dash into the current, where he found himself the next instant up to his waist in the

black water and clinging desperately by one free hand to a wet rock, with the instinct of preserving himself from being carried off his feet. Then miserably he felt his way back to the dry rocks on the edge of the stream, and dropping down upon their harsh bosom, he began to cry bitterly.

He had so hoped there would be a crossing place! If he could only find it! His feet were sore with bruises now, and he felt as if he could not walk another step. He grew cold as he crouched there, sobbing with disappointment, for though the sun shines hot during the daytime on the chestnut trees and the vines of the Apennines, the nights, even of summer, are cool, and now a chill wind came sweeping down the valley from the fir-crowned summits of Abetone.

Presently the little wanderer roused himself and stood on his feet. Nothing could tempt him to try to find his way back to the house of the priest, not even aching feet or

shivering limbs, but he began to think there might be a more sheltered place near by — this little boy of the road, who had taken many a noontide nap curled up at the foot of some wayside tree. Perhaps the earliest light of dawn would show him the stepping-stones and the road, of which there was no hint now in the blackness of darkness across the river. Painfully he crept back toward the bank, where presently he curled himself into a knot at the foot of a huge, distorted old chestnut tree, a short distance up the slope. The grass was soft and springy about the roots of the old tree, and a huge boulder near by shut off the wind from Natale's shivering legs. So, with a sigh of content, and for the first time tasting the sweets of his new freedom, the little acrobat closed his eyes upon the stars winking down at him from above the stirring leaves, and fell asleep for the second time that night.

CHAPTER X

ON THE WING

LONG before Natale waked, the day had dawned, but the sun had not long looked down into the valley before he turned stiffly on his grassy couch and rubbed his eyes. Then, however, he lost not an instant in taking up his journey where it had left off the night before.

How easy it was in the light of the sunbeams of the early morning to spring over the dry stones of the bank, and with a swift glance up and down select a safe place to cross the water which had seemed so dangerous and cruel in the dark.

The daylight changed everything, of course, and it was but a few moments after waking before he was across the stream and

scrambling up to the low wall bounding the road on the river side. From the inner edge of the road the mountains rose precipitately.

As Natale clambered over the wall the church bells of Cutigliano burst into a wrangle of sound, which must have echoed from one end of the village to the other. Though the distance softened the metallic tones, the little boy was startled by them into a scamper away down the sunlit road as if the mischievous village boys whose office it was to ring the bells were in headlong chase after him. The day must have been the *festa* of some saint, and for a long time Natale heard the bells' voices, sweetened more and more as his bare feet trudged onward and the distance fell between him and them. But he soon gave up his running because his legs were stiff and his feet sore, and as yet no one appeared coming along the road behind him, in pursuit.

There had been no doubt in his own mind of the direction he should take after once gaining the road. He knew that Giovanni and Antonio with the house-wagon had been bound for the Bagni di Lucca, and also he knew that the road to the Bagni led downward with the stream, and not up toward the cold region of Abetone, the "Great Fir Tree."

So all he had to do was to follow the road, broad and white, by the way they had come three weeks before, without need, even, of asking his way of the peasants he should meet. He had turned the shoulder of a great green mountain-spur which entirely shut off the view of Cutigliano before he would stop for an instant in his lame tramping. Once assured that the town was out of sight behind him, he sat down breathlessly on one of the heaps of loose stones such as flank every mountain road in Italy. Then he deliberately took each foot in turn in his

small hands and gravely and pitifully examined its bruises. There was nothing to be done, then, but plant them in the road again and continue his way.

For an hour or more he trudged painfully on, but the stiffness in his legs left him after a while, and he began to be only hungry. He wished he had thought of hiding in his pocket, the night before, a crust of the dark, coarse bread he loved, and which had always been plentiful at Sora Grazia's. But the coppers jingled comfortably there instead, and Natale contented himself to wait for breakfast till he should pass some bread shop along the road.

The morning air was sweet with the freshness of early day, and the delicious odor of the wild thyme's tiny blossoms. Tall harebells nodded to him from the thyme and heather bank shoulder-high above the road, and sparkled with the sunshine and dew upon their purple flowerets. The river,

which in the darkness had seemed to mock him with its roaring, now only murmured softly as it slipped over the stones in the sunlight.

By and by, Natale began to meet people in the road, men with donkeys bearing huge basketfuls of wet grass and wild flowers shorn from the steep terraces above for the cow or donkey at home, and women tramping in their thick-soled shoes to Cutigliano with baskets of fresh fruit or eggs or cheeses for the summer hotels balanced on their heads. From all of these Natale kept his face steadily averted, lest they should bear back to the town tidings of his going. Usually, after passing a group of these wayfarers, the boy broke into a quick run in order to lengthen the distance between them and himself, but these spurts of speed availed him little, for he had always to stop and rest afterward, and so lost many more minutes than he had gained of the golden day.

The road had already become a curving white glare before Natale came in sight of a long stone house having many windows and doors, and standing on the inner edge of the road. He came upon it suddenly, on turning a sharp curve, and then he saw that another house faced it on the opposite side of the road, and that an inviting shade lay between. The back of one of the houses looked directly upon the steep slope of the mountain behind, while the rear wall of its opposite neighbor had its foundation in the rocky banks of the tumbling river. In the shade between, barefoot peasant children played noisily. Near by, a stream of spring water, clear and cold, trickled from a wooden trough into a rough stone basin.

And here at last were rest and food and drink for the runaway, — only no one must learn that he was a runaway !

A fat and black-eyed housewife with arms akimbo stood in one of the doors, and as

Natale came up to her on limping feet, she eyed him with interest from the stone of the doorstep.

“Will you give me a little piece of bread, signora? See, I have money,” said Natale, showing her a handful of Mr. Grantly’s copper coins in his open palm.

“A bit of bread you shall have, to be sure, and your *soldi* you shall keep, little one,” the good-natured creature promptly answered, and while the children left their play and gathered about Natale, with friendly eyes, their mother disappeared into the very small and dusky shop behind.

“There, sit down and eat,” she said, returning with a hunk of bread and a generous lump of cheese on a coarse plate in her hand.

As Natale received the plate and moved rather lamely toward the dripping fountain in the shade, the children ran ahead, and one filled a rusty tin cup with the cold

water and had it ready for Natale by the time he reached the mossy brink of the fountain.

These little ones of the road, wild and rude enough in their play, were well used to offering the "cup of cold water" to the passing wayfarer, and Natale's thirsty throat gulped the draught gratefully.

There was something about the child which arrested the attention of the woman more than the ordinary passer-by often did, and she also stood watching Natale breakfast hungrily.

He was shy and downcast, fearing difficult questions, and as soon as the last crumb of bread and cheese had disappeared he got to his feet, setting the empty plate on the margin of the fountain.

"Thank you, signora, and good-by," he said, and was off.

"No, but wait!" she cried, laying her hand on his shrinking shoulder. "You

have eaten my bread; now answer my questions. What is your name, *picino*,¹ and where are you going?"

"Down the road," was the shyly spoken answer to the last question, with a quiet waiving of the first. "Please let me go, signora. It is already late, and I must hasten."

"Well, go!" she exclaimed then, "and a good journey to you!" But she stood watching him trudge briskly away from her until another curve in the zigzag road hid him from her sight.

"Some stranger's child!" she muttered to herself, going back to the doorstep. "I have never seen him pass here before, and few there be who pass by without the knowledge of Chiara. Well, I am glad he has his *soldi* safe in his pocket. May the saints protect and feed my own children when they go a-wandering! You, Beppo!

¹ Little boy.

keep your head out of the dust of the road !”

“Mamá, mamá, Beppino is making *capitomboli*, such as the boy who was here just now made in the circus at Cutigliano, on the day we went with our father to the big tent ! Do you not remember ?” cried an admiring small sister of Beppo. “See, our Beppo does them even better than the other boy, mamá !”

The woman gave a little start of recollection, and then dismissed the idea which had occurred to her, as impossible — fortunately, perhaps, for Natale.

“Silly girl ! The circus people went down the road a week ago to the Bagni, do *you* not remember ? How should the boy be seven days behind ? No more *capitomboli*, I say, Beppo *mio*, in all this dust !”

In a carriage, with two good horses and a fine cracking whip behind them, one may drive from Cutigliano down to the Baths of Lucca in the first half of a summer’s day.



“Capitomboli, such as the boy who was here just now made in the circus at Cutigliano.” *Page 142.*

On two tired slim little legs, one would need much more time to accomplish the journey. Also when one has been for six days imprisoned within stone walls, one does not hurry — if fairly out of danger — along beauteous and fresh-smelling paths of freedom.

Every hour or so after leaving the woman and children at the fountain, Natale stopped for a rest along the way. Sometimes he sat down on a heap of mending stones by the wayside, in company with some stone-breaker hammering away in the shade of his sun screen, a rude lattice of chestnut boughs propped behind the heap of stones.

The monotonous clink of the hammer breaking the sharp-edged stones was usually stayed as the lonely worker turned to chat with the large-eyed child hovering near. Only once or twice was Natale's cheerful "*Buon' giorno!*"¹ returned by an unwelcom-

¹ Good morning.

ing growl or by sour silence. In such cases, the dawdling feet made all haste to pass and seek a resting-place in the shade of some breeze-rustled chestnut tree quite out of sight of the cross stone-breaker.

The second night was passed as the first had been, out of doors, after a supper of hot rice paid for at an *osteria*,¹ a short way back along the road. Natale might have slept, as well, at the little inn, but he was too unused to roofs to dream of proposing it, and the absent-minded old landlord had not seemed to be thinking of anything but puffing away at his pipe, as Natale slipped past him and out of the dingy passage-way, after paying for his food.

A long-bodied two-wheeled cart stood outside the inn door, its shafts' ends resting on the ground, its rear high in air, and Natale, with an instinct for sleeping above wheels, had decided to return to the cart

¹ Inn.

for a night's lodging place when the world should be dark again. But sleep overtook him as he lay waiting at the foot of a tree to which he had scrambled from the road below, and when he roused, dawn was staining the pale sky with rose color.

The next day promised to pass as the first had done, — with slipping shyly past occasional houses of entertainment along the way, with lingerings to stare into the mysterious depths of some noisy mill in league with the tumbling river, and with long, monotonous trappings, between times, along the smooth road, bordered always by the mountains and the river. As the road neared the valley, it crossed dashing streams hurrying to join their waters to the broader water of the river, and so solid was the stone masonry of the arches that one would never have known that he was crossing a bridge but for the sparkle and the laughter of the

foaming water as it dashed under the road and out again.

Many times Natale, himself a small dark speck on the endless white road, looked up the long mountain slopes, green in the sunlight, purple in the shadow, and glimpsed high above him on the giddy heights the climbing roofs of some hoary old mountain town, away out of hearing of the busy river, out of reach of traveling circus wagons, and which,

“Like an eagle’s nest hangs on the crest
Of purple Apennine.”

It was past noon of the second day when Natale entered a village on a level with the highway. Here the road suddenly changed into a stone-paved street, running between high houses and echoing with the tramp of wooden-soled shoes and the patter of donkeys’ hoofs.

He stopped at the door of a sour-smelling wine shop where sat a man on a stool out-

side the door. To him the little boy put his question as to whether this town might perhaps be very near to the Bagni di Lucca. This man wore a red fez on his bushy, black head, and down his long, black beard trickled drops from the wine cup at his lips. The fellow did not stop his drinking long enough to reply in so many words to the question, but a decided shaking of his head and the pointing of a long, dirty finger onward sufficiently enlightened Natale, and he kept slowly on his way.

In passing a small baker's shop, he stopped and bought a great ring of sweetish bread, and then slipping his arm through this, he went more cheerily onward. There were still many *soldi* left in his pocket, and surely this beautiful ring of bread would last until the Bagni di Lucca should come in sight, with, of course, the dear yellow tent set in its midst!

One of the last houses he passed as he left

the town was entered through a garden by a huge wooden door opening upon the cobblestones of the street. This door stood ajar, and Natale stayed his steps for a moment to gaze through the aperture down a charming vista of trellised vines supported on crumbling white columns of masonry. Green and gold lights played over the rough paving-stones of the cloister-like colonnade through the latticework above. Halfway down this corridor, two or three girls romped and sang together, their scarlet kerchiefs and the rich blues of their skirts making dashes of vivid color in the shade where they lounged. Pale jewels of grapes, already growing pink and amethystine, crowded the vines with promise of luscious sweetness when their full time should come.

The girls peered back at the travel-worn lad peering in at them, but when the largest of them called mockingly to him, "Enter,

signore !” Natale ran away down the street and again out upon the road. The girls had made him think of Arduina and Olga and little Maria, and away down at the end of the corridor he had caught a glimpse of a gray-haired woman sitting on a flight of broken stone steps, with an infant on her lap. His heart swelled with homesickness. If only he might see Nonna once again ! How long was the monotonous road to Bagni di Lucca !

The day, however, was not to close without an exciting and important event.

CHAPTER XI

FLUTTERING A LITTLE FARTHER

NATALE sat down in his leisurely fashion on the low wall bounding the road just beyond the town and began daintily nibbling around the crisp, sugared edges of his bread ring. It was mid-afternoon, and while his jaws worked steadily, his wide bright eyes watched with interest two bicyclists toiling up the hill and trundling their wheels alongside. As they passed him by without a glance, their faces red and perspiring, and their shoes whitened with the light dust, the boy's eyes still followed them and lighted upon a queer figure coming from the town he had just quitted. It was the red-capped, swarthy-faced man

of the wine-shop door, and now his shoulders were bent under a pack slung on his back, and his legs were bowed as he limped along, and he wore an old overcoat much too long, which had seen better days upon another's shoulders.

The wheelmen paid no attention to this fellow, as he stopped on meeting them and perhaps offered them a sight of his wares hidden in the pack, so the peddler presently came up with Natale, grumbling sourly.

“These foreigners without manners!” he growled, planting himself in front of the little boy's swinging legs. “Ah! you are the boy who goes to the Bagni. Come, I also go thither. We shall be companions merry enough!”

Natale had no fancy for joining company with this man who frowned with his black brows and grinned, in turn, with big white teeth gleaming in his hairy face, but neither had he the courage to demur. Therefore,

he slipped down unwillingly from his perch and trotted along at the peddler's side.

Fortunately, the man asked no questions and spoke little, and before evening, his steady tramp had led Natale over more miles than the whole previous day had carried him. Little cared this strange, silent fellow for leaning over walls to gaze at the foaming water singing over the rocks, or for idly resting on a bridge to watch the white cloud-ships crossing the azure sea overhead, as the white sails of the orange boats ply the blue waves between Sicily and the Italian coast, and to dream of future glory as an acrobat of renown!

The sun had again sunk behind the rounded summits in the west, when the peddler at last stood still and grinned down upon the panting child.

"One easily sees that you are no traveler," he said in his hoarse, unpleasant voice. "Now we will sit down here by the roadside

and make our beds for the night. Did you mention supper? The bracelet you wear on your arm will suffice for us both, if we divide it according to the size of our stomachs. *Ecco!*” And Natale’s precious ring of sweetened bread was rudely snatched from his arm.

Naturally, Natale was most indignant at being treated in this manner by so perfect a stranger, and he did not hesitate to remonstrate.

“But the bread is mine, signore! I bought it with my own *soldi* in the town,” he cried, clutching at the beautiful ring of bread, already being broken in two by the peddler’s dirty fingers.

“*Soldi!*” echoed the man; “and where are your precious *soldi*?”

“At the shop where I bought the bread, of course,” was the shrewd reply, and not a coin remaining in Natale’s pocket jostled against its neighbor now. They kept as

quiet as if they knew that long, eager fingers were ready to pounce upon them.

Then a change came over the peddler's manner, and he showed his unpleasant-looking teeth in a broad smile. Perhaps he was planning a look into those little pockets by and by, who knows?

"What a clever boy you are!" he cried. "Well, as you are also such a hungry little beast, take back your bread, and for a relish I shall give you a smell of my own supper. See!"

So speaking, he drew a roll of sausage from a pocket of his long coat. The sausage was wrapped in a soiled handkerchief, and there was a hunk of black bread with it. A knife with a curious curved handle and long, shining blade was next produced, and the peddler went to work, alternately whacking off bits of the highly seasoned meat and the hard bread, and devouring them with crunching teeth and smacking lips.

Natale gnawed industriously at his own bread without even thinking of offering to barter a portion of it for a taste of the savory sausage. There was a kind of fascination in watching the ugly fellow eat, and the wondering brown eyes were fixed upon the peddler's surly face.

It was now the close of a warm afternoon. A light haze wrapped the more distant mountains in misty blue, a chirring of insects stirred the silence about the travelers, and now and then a carriage or cart whisked downward, or toiled upward, along the road, accompanied by the jingle of harness bells and the whooping cries of the drivers. A fog of white dust rose behind every passing vehicle, and the chestnut leaves overhead, long unwashed by rain, hung grimy and listless in the heavy air.

As the peddler supped, large drops of sweat gathered on his long, red nose and dripped down his black beard, while his

face grew flushed and more scowling than ever. Presently, with an angry movement which startled Natale half out of his wits, he dropped the sausage and knife to the ground and tore off his coat.

“Poor men have no choice !” he muttered. “Bare shoulders in winter, the cast-off winter coat of an Englishman in summer !”

The soiled and tattered old coat was tossed aside, falling uncomfortably close to Natale’s feet, but he did not dare to push it away with disdainful touch. The peddler’s meal now came to an end, the remains of the sausage were gathered up with the cruel-looking knife and laid aside with the handkerchief, after which the peddler, with a satisfied grunt, sprawled himself on his side — to sleep, as Natale devoutly hoped.

But not quite yet was the man ready for sleep. Reaching for his pack, with a lazy movement from where he lay, he unstrapped it and drew from among the coarse

laces and horn buttons inside a flat bottle, which he uncorked and turned up to his lips. As the liquor gurgled down his throat and its strong odor tainted the air, Natale let his eyes fall to the uncomely garment lying within touch of his fingers.

Then the boy's heart leaped into his throat, and it seemed as if he would suffocate where he sat. He dared not move, and bravely he looked away from the thing which lay within such easy reach of his longing hands, half-in, half-out of the fellow's old coat pocket.

If only the peddling thief would go off into a drunken sleep!

For there, close by, lay Giovanni's old pocketbook of stamped Spanish leather, stained and battered, as Natale had always known it!

Who could tell whether any money still remained in it? There was nothing to do but wait till the man should go to sleep, and

then, stealthily drawing the pocketbook away from the overcoat, speed down the road to a safe distance and find out all about it.

He had not long to wait before the peddler returned the bottle to the pack, and then, disposing himself on the ground, sank into an open-mouthed slumber.

Only when quite sure that the sleep was real did Natale steal away on noiseless feet, prize in hand, across the shallow ditch bordering the road, and onward to the shelter of a ruined shed quite out of sight of their resting-place. Putting the shed between him and the road, Natale unstrapped the pocketbook with trembling eagerness.

There lay the notes into which Giovanni had from time to time changed the cumbersome copper soldi of their earnings! There were the dingy blue five-franc notes, with many one and two-franc notes of a most uncompromising dirt color!

The boy dared not take time to count them all. The fierce ogre asleep under the tree might rouse at any moment and find the pocketbook gone. Away, away, he must fly, on and on toward the Bagni di Lucca, even though evening was at hand, and a gray blanket of cloud threatened to hide the coming stars. So the little feet twinkled away through the dust, Natale's heart now heavy with the dread of what was behind, now light with the joy of what might be ahead. As the warm dusk fell, it seemed safe to walk again, although every sound from behind made Natale's heart seem to leap into his throat. Indeed, it seemed pretty much to stay in his throat, until, by and by, he came upon some one who was to give him most welcome news.

He had traveled half a mile farther, and still it was not yet dark when he sighted a cluster of houses ahead and heard cheerful human voices. Coming up to the first

house, he found a pretty, plump young mother on her doorstep, cuddling a nursling on her breast. From across the road and about the house came busy sounds of sheep and cows being housed for the night in their thatched pens, and nobody seemed at leisure except the laughing woman with the crowing baby in her arms.

On plying the woman with his usual question, Natale learned that the end of his pilgrimage was indeed "just down the road a little distance", although, on such short legs as his, the woman added thoughtfully, it might take two hours more of brisk walking to reach even the big circus tent, standing on the outskirts of the Bagni all the past week.

Ah ! and was the circus still there ?

Of that the woman could not speak certainly, as some passer-by had mentioned only the day before that but one or two more performances were to be given before

the *circo* moved on to Lucca. She herself had wished to go to see the wonderful Antonio Bisbini, also the little Olga who had no more fear of a great horse's hoofs than she herself of her baby's brown toes. But how was a woman to leave her house and the tired men folks, to tramp down the hill and up again at night, with a heavy baby in her arms? Was the little boy hoping to reach the tent in time for the night's exhibition?

Natale's heart had thrilled at the mention of Antonio's magic name, and his spine straightened and his head was lifted with the pride of conscious relationship with the hero of the circus. He gave but a thought now to Olga's usurpation of his place in the ring. For was he not returning to his own again, with the stolen pocketbook in the breast of his blouse? What a welcome there would be for him now!

"Well, good night, *bimbo*, if you will go,

and may you enjoy seeing the riding in the tent!" the woman called to him, looking wistfully after the little figure plodding away, after a polite return of her farewell.

Natale's heart was carefree now, as he limped lamely onward to the tune of the "Dead March," humming the air as he went.

The road had been growing more level for some hours as it entered the valley, and the river flowed more still and deep. The hush of night gathered under the trees, and the birds and insects went to rest or noiselessly crept from their haunts about vine and root, intent upon the business of the hour.

As signs of the famous Baths of Lucca began to appear at certain curves in the road, Natale became possessed of but one idea. Down the river he began to see the lights of the town, and he even thought he heard the notes of band music, which,

in truth, were wafted to his ears from the terrace of the Casino. His head was full of plans of stealing into the tent, and for at least this last night at Bagni di Lucca, playing his own part in the dying-horse act. He would not take precious moments now for practicing a somersault or wheel, as he went along, but it was easy to rehearse the dialogue over the dying brute — if only his tired, tired legs could keep the road, and his aching eyes find the old yellow tent set up somewhere among the trees.

Presently, the gleaming eyes of bicycles began to whiz by, and a squarely built, many-windowed villa or two rose flush with the road. A little farther now, and the tent would surely appear, with perhaps Cara in her red dress at the doorway, and the band playing outside in the light of the big lamp!

Laughing stragglers now sauntered here and there, none noticing the child making his dizzy way among them toward a flare

of light on one side where the trees fell apart. One would have hardly believed it possible that there was room for even the tent of the Circo Equestre of Antonio Bisbini and Giovanni Marzuchetti in the space between the long storehouse of corn and the terraced hillside behind. Yet, not only was the tent there, spread to its full circle and height, but the brown wagon also was visible, drawn within its shadow, and now the staring brown eyes of the little wanderer had found them both.

Yes, there was the dear old tent, with its white patches upon the dull yellow, showing against the vine-clad hillsides of the Bagni. Also, there was the smoky lamp fastened to a post, where two ways met and parted. There was the usual crowd gathered outside about the entrance where Cara in her red dress and gauzy veil watched over the money bowl, in wait for some possible late-arriving spectator. The big reflecting lan-

tern on the table showed the wistful features of the outsiders as they crowded about the tent.

As Natale crept around the tent, he saw the bare, brown legs of some trespassing youngster following squirming head and shoulders inside, under the curtain by way of the ground. In former times, the little acrobat would have been the first to raise an alarm and assist with alacrity in the ignominious expulsion of the intruder who wanted to see the show, and yet keep his *soldi* in his pocket, if such were there. But the sight of the enterprising offender made little impression on Natale's mind now, as he stepped past the struggling legs, for, the hour being much later than he thought, the band inside just then struck up the familiar schottisch, and Natale knew that Il Duca was even now treading the ring in a dignified dance, led by Giovanni himself. His heart gave a suffocating throb, and his cheeks

burned. Then he shivered with cold, and his weary legs faltered before the daring deed about to be perpetrated.

There was plenty of time, even yet, and he would do it even if Giovanni should strike him to the ground with his cracking whip, which had never yet, however, been raised against him with more than threatening intent.

He stopped to listen a moment longer to the music before entering. Yes, there it was, the schottisch, accompanied by the beat of the clever hoofs. Then, as he knew the moment was at hand for Il Duca to drop dying in the ring, Natale crept swiftly in among the players gathered as usual in the small tent behind. Olga was there and Arduina, in their fanciful costumes, and Elvira, his mother, waiting for their "cues."

CHAPTER XII

AT LAST

THE small, pale apparition of Natale, suddenly projected into their midst, so startled them all that even Olga forgot to listen for the thud of Il Duca's heavy body on the ground and the sound of his groans. They stared open-mouthed for an instant, and then the apparition vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

But the strains of the "Dead March" now recalled little Olga to herself, and she darted from behind the curtain and out into the light of the oil lamp, only to hear a familiar boyish voice instead of her own answering shrilly Giovanni's question, "What are you crying about, child?"

"Because our horse is dead!"

“But are you sure he is quite dead?” And Giovanni’s voice faltered with sudden fear, as he gazed at Natale’s small, dusty figure kneeling at the horse’s head, with Oh! such a world of pleading in his dark eyes and folded hands.

“Quite dead!” wailed Natale.

“Get up and feel his pulse, boy. If there is any pulse he is *not* dead!” Giovanni spoke fiercely, but there was no frown upon his face.

And so the farce went on as usual, to the end, while Olga, with pouting lips, slipped behind the curtain again and joined the others who were, every one, peeping in to see little Natale do his beloved dying-horse act.

The little girl had come to enjoy her bit of acting with Giovanni and Il Duca, for kneeling with folded hands and sobbing breath was a pretty attitude, always loudly applauded, and she no longer feared that

Il Duca would lift his faithful hoof against her. But now, here was Natale back again, and his shrill little voice going over the silly replies to the clown in his own, old way. Well, it would be rather nice, after all, to have Natale again, and she would not fuss about it as there were so few things he could really do, while she was learning new feats already, and would soon be riding Tesoro bareback around the ring.

A perfect storm of applause succeeded the end of the dialogue, when Il Duca scrambled to his feet, and the tent was filled with cries for a repetition of the scene. But Giovanni turned swiftly and lifted Natale to the horse's back, only in time to prevent the child's falling to the ground, as if stunned by the noise of the shouting. Out of the ring and through the smaller tent to the open air beyond Il Duca pranced proudly, with Giovanni at his bridle, holding Natale in his place with his free hand.

Outside, they laid the child down on the warm ground in the dim light, and Arduina brought a cupful of water and bathed his face, while Olga stood by, and Antonio and Elvira went back to help Giovanni with his table-leaping inside.

“He is not dead, is he, Arduina?” Olga asked in a frightened voice. “Feel his pulse as we do Il Duca’s!”

“Hurry and call Nonna!” the older girl urged nervously. “We shall have to go in, the very next thing after this, and Nonna will know what to do.”

So when Natale next opened his eyes, the light of a sputtering candle showed him the gray head of dear Nonna bent over him. He lay on a small mattress in a corner, and the smoke-stained ceiling of the house-wagon shut out the sky.

“*Ecco!* he opens his eyes, my *bimbo!* my Natalino! *Carino,*¹ what does it all mean?

¹ Darling.

Tell Nonna how you have come back to the *circo!*”

But at first Natale only lifted one hand to stroke the dear, wrinkled face of Nonna, in smiling content. After a little, he laid his hand on the breast of his blouse and begged to be allowed to go to Giovanni.

“He will not scold me for coming back when he sees what I have brought with me,” he urged.

But Nonna reminded him that the tent was still crowded with spectators, — did he not hear the music close by, and the laughter of the people, as the clown and Antonio and Arduina did the funny pantomime?

Natale lay back listening, with a happy smile on his lips, while Nonna went to blow up the coals of a small fire on the ground outside, and to hurry the broth that Natale might have nourishment. She could not prevail upon the boy to confide to her

what he was so anxious to tell his stepfather, and she left him alone, too glad to have him returned to them, to grumble over his reticence.

Of all the children, Natale most sweetly recalled her own son's childhood, and Antonio's boyish affection for her, his cheeriness and obedience, had seemed to live again in Natale, although he was Elvira's son, and no grandson, at all, of her own.

The little ones, Tito, Maria, Gigi and the rest, were asleep in their corners, and Nonna had been sitting at rest in the wagon door when Olga had rushed up with the news that Natale had arrived and lay dying, perhaps, on the ground outside the tent. It was Nonna's strong arms that had borne him away to the house-wagon, and Nonna's vigorous rubbings and applications of cold water that had brought him out of the half-swoon of exhaustion. So Nonna was

content with her work, and would not press Natalino's secret from him.

By the time the performance was over, and the merry-makers had streamed out whistling, chatting and laughing together, and had gone their ways homeward, Natale, fed and rested, was sitting up bright-eyed and eager to announce his news.

It was stuffy and hot in the wagon, and Giovanni went to fetch the boy outside, the moment the tent had emptied and the players were at leisure. Olga had not even taken time to change the yellow satin blouse and pink tights for her usual faded cotton frock. As for Antonio, he had only slipped his feet into a pair of loose slippers, so the great acrobat stood before Natale in all the glory of his spangled black velvet and shapely, pink-clad limbs.

As the night was dark, one of the lamps was brought from the tent, and a wild, gypsy-like scene its rays revealed under the

trees about the steps of the house-wagon. Elvira, in an access of motherly tenderness, gathered Natale to her red satin bosom, and called him by all the musical pet names belonging to the boys and girls of Italy, while the musicians peeped over the shoulders of the actors and wondered how little Natale had ever found his way on foot all the way from Cutigliano to the Bagni.

“The tramping will have limbered up his legs!” one whispered to another.

“Stiffened them, rather!” was the reply, and then everybody stopped talking and only gazed the harder as Natale put his hand within the breast of his blouse and drew out the old leather pocketbook.

“There, Giovanni!” he said simply, reaching the book toward his stepfather. “The ugly, black peddler with the red cap like our Leo’s stole the money, and while he slept on his back, by the road, I stole it from

him, and then — Oh, how fast I ran and ran that he might not catch me and kill me with his long, sharp knife !”

Giovanni, speechless with astonishment and joy, solemnly received and kissed and opened the pocketbook, and then spread out the notes, one by one, on his knee, while the rest crowded around, counting them aloud.

What if all should not be there ? Natale’s eyes shone feverishly as he leaned forward from his mother’s knee, his gaze alternately upon the clown’s face, and the long, lithe fingers handling the money.

Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, sixty, sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five, eighty, eighty-two, eighty-four, eighty-six, eighty-eight, ninety, ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three, ninety-four, ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, *one hundred!*

Natale's head dropped back against the red satin shoulder of his mother, and his large eyes gazed wistfully into Giovanni's face.

Would they let him stay now that he had come all the weary way "after the wagon", bringing them the lost money? Their welcome had been encouraging; would they let him remain, or must he be sent back to Cutigliano, to the priest, to Sora Grazia, to school, to imprisonment in a house without wheels, and without Nonna?

It was Antonio Bisbini who brought up the question finally and in a manner settled it with his slow-spoken words. Everybody had wondered and rejoiced over the safe return of the pocketbook, with the money untouched, and Natale had had to tell all about the peddler, and the risks he had run of rousing the fellow from sleep in making his escape with the pocketbook.

"He was the man who teased me to buy

the beautiful diamond brooch on the day of San Lorenzo!" cried pretty Arduina, who well remembered the peddler's flattering attentions to her in his hope of finding a purchaser for his paltry glass jewelry.

"And the same who so frightened our Tito outside the church," Nonna chimed in indignantly. "And he all the time pretended to be so pious and anxious to see the saints' relics in the church! No wonder Tito cried at the snapping of those dirty, thievish fingers in his little face. The saints only know how he found the money in Giovanni's coat-pocket hung in the tent!"

"Mamá *mia*, do you remember how stiff my legs were when I played at leaping with the boys at school in Florence?" Antonio, the finished acrobat, asked thoughtfully, breaking a long straw with his fingers and looking at nobody. His blond head reached almost to the lowest boughs of the chestnut

tree under which he stood, and the lamp-light flared over his fair face and glittering costume.

Natale sat up to hear the words of this oracle, and even slipped off the satin lap of Elvira to the ground, in order to be nearer Antonio.

"I remember that you were a studious boy," Nonna murmured in reply, with a note of the old bitterness in her voice.

"Natale has done a good work in returning the money to us, Giovanni," the acrobat continued. "Why send him back to the foreigners? He was unhappy, or he would never have come all this distance alone — mere baby that he is."

"And the Englishwoman's money?" Giovanni asked in a businesslike tone.

"What has been used, replace from the pocketbook. It is not much, as we have taken in so good a sum, here at the Bagni. Leo can ride back with it to Cutigliano

to-morrow morning, and return in time for our last night here."

"*Ebbene!*" said Giovanni, and this meaning "All right, with a very good will," so it was decided, and then everybody hurried to get into comfortable old clothes and to eat supper.

Leo was sent to the nearest wine shop for a bottle of good red wine that the troop might drink to the joy of Natale's return and the recovery of the money; also to the just discomfiture of all thieving peddlers.

Long before the evening came to an end, a tired but most happy little boy had crept into the shadow and fallen asleep, with his head pillowed against Nonna's knee.

"I am glad thou art come back to us, Natalino," she whispered in the softest Italian above the tangled brown curls, while the rest sang and made merry, "and if thy little legs will only grow as straight and as strong as my Antonio's, and thy

heart remain as faithful to old Nonna, the saints forgive me if I care very much whether thou be acrobat or priest !”

For some reason known best to himself, but readily guessed by the clown and the rest of the older members of the circus, the swarthy peddler was not seen in Bagni di Lucca for many a day after. But Natale did not lose his dread of encountering the fierce eyes and the cruel knife until long after the circus troop had taken to the road again.

Nothing in the world could have induced Mrs. Bishop, the English lady at Cutigliano, to touch the money returned with, what was to her, most astonishing promptness and honesty through Leo, one of the musicians.

In the first place, the notes were very dirty, much more so, she was sure, than when she had paid them to the clown a little more

than a week before. Secondly, she would not reclaim money which had been once devoted to the cause of civilization and of education. If the "little ingrate" despised his opportunities and had finally returned to his "wallowing in the mire", let the money which would have bought him for decency and for usefulness go with him. Thirdly — but this was not acknowledged even to Betty — the old lady's heart had been touched by the tale Luigi the priest had come to tell her on the morning after the flight of the birdling. So her heart was not quite so hard as her words sounded, and she was in truth rather rejoiced, as well as very much relieved in mind, when Leo had arrived to tell of runaway Natale's return to the troop in safety. Therefore, generously, Mrs. Bishop would not receive the money because it seemed to her no longer her own; surely Giovanni and Elvira and Nonna had kept

their part of the bargain in giving up the child, while Natale had not even been consulted in their plan.

The roll of notes was therefore returned by Leo to Giovanni, with the foreign lady's instructions that the money was to be spent in providing meat for broth for the children so long as it should last. There would still be plenty of cold water always, free as air, for daily baths along the roads of Italy, and Mrs. Bishop hoped that Sora Grazia's ministrations in that line would not soon be forgotten by Natale, who for one short week had been a scrubbed little lad. (It is safe to say that they were not !)

Along with the money, Mrs. Bishop sent a school primer to Natale, with the admonition that he would at least try to learn to read while jogging up and down the earth and upsetting his stomach in all heathenish sports.

But Madame Cioche and Betty rejoiced

in open triumph over Natale's freedom, to say nothing of the priest Luigi and the wise old gentleman who had in fact unwittingly opened the cage door for flight.

Sora Grazia was a trifle glum for a day or two at finding her pains thrown away upon the sulky little protégé of the foreign lady, but as the month's pay for his board and lodging had been in advance, and the nearly new clothes and shoes and cap were now thrown into the bargain by Mrs. Bishop, to repay her for her extra trouble, she too soon became content and even pleased with the ending of the rich lady's scheme.

So the bare front wall of the priest's house in Cutigliano among the mountains has, as yet, no prospect of being adorned by a memorial tablet to a waif of all outdoors who was willing to be a great man in books and goodness.

And Natale?

Well, Natale is learning, better and better, how to turn his *capitomboli* over the dusty circus carpet, and he still feels Il Duca's pulse with sorrowful apprehension to the tune of the "Dead March in Saul" — by night among the oil lamps.

By day, he trudges along hot white roads, under the marvelous blue of Italy's sky, with Niero and Bianco for company. Or, he lies on the ground at Nonna's side under some spreading tree in the camping-out times, sometimes spelling out words in a dog-eared primer, oftener gazing past the tree tops at the cloud-ships sailing overhead, while Nonna tells of Antonio's wonderful childhood.

By and by, when Natale grows too large to do the dying-horse act, and little Tito, or Gigi takes his place, he will be dashing with the horses around the ring. And then, in the still further and sweeter by and by, when Antonio's agile legs will perhaps have

begun to stiffen again, and the straight back to bend forward a little as he walks, who but Natale will be the shining star of the Circo Equestre, like another bespangled, pink-clad Antonio, with crisp brown curls and laughing eyes, and the nimblest, straightest legs in all Italy?

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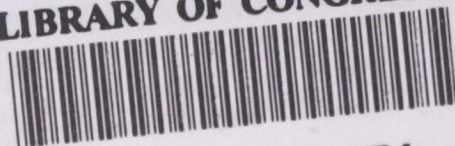
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